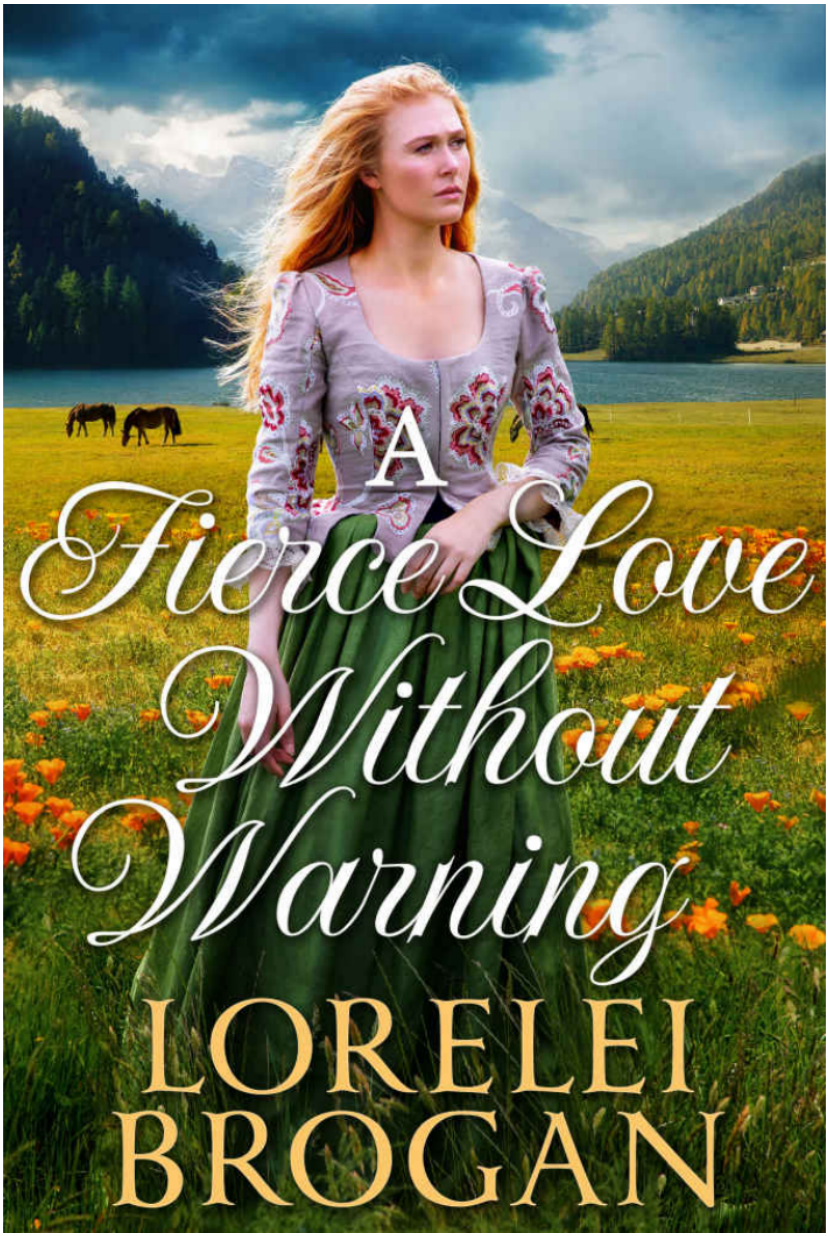

A
Fierce Love
Without
Warning
LORELEI
BROGAN

A Fierce Love Without Warning

A WESTERN ROMANCE NOVEL

LORELEI BROGAN

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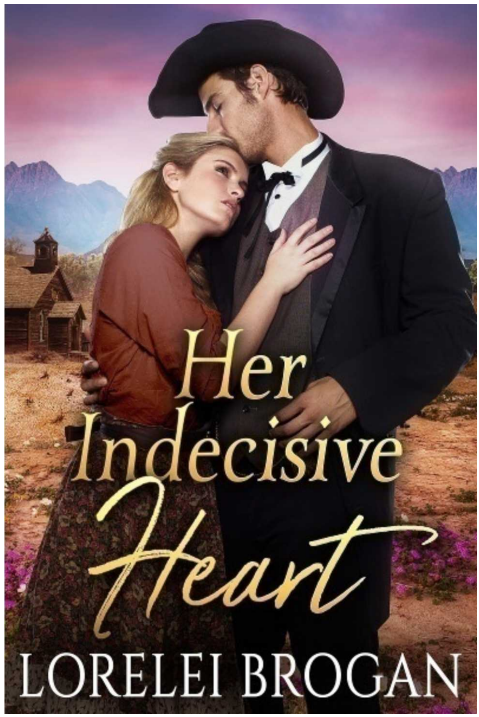
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Her
Indecisive
Heart
LORELEI BROGAN

A Fierce Love Without Warning

Introduction

Tillie Hartley's whole life has been planned out and she always thought she was fine with that. Until her father forces her to marry a man twice her age. As Tillie travels to her husband-to-be, her stagecoach is overcome by bandits and for the first time ever she fears for her very life. That is, until a group of Apache men comes to her rescue... even though they seem to hate her. Scared and confused, Tillie will find a glimmer of hope in the most unexpected form of a fierce warrior…

Tarak, the second son of the Apache tribe,

hates the white man. Yet when he saves Tillie Hartley, he finds that he can’t stop himself from being intrigued by her feistiness. Tillie is unlike anyone he has ever met, and she makes him question his anger towards her people. Unfortunately, his tribe doesn't share his sentiments. They want Tillie gone and will go to extreme lengths to make this happen... Can he keep Tillie safe without betraying his people?

Tarak and Tillie come from two different worlds, but soon the connection between them becomes undeniable. Could a romance between an Apache warrior and a courageous rancher's daughter transcend all the obstacles

between them? Can their love survive and even bring their people together?

Chapter 1

“Buck up, Tills,” a jovial voice said from outside of Tillie’s coach window. “If you look so sour, your new husband might send you back to your father.”

That was it for Tillie. She reached out and grabbed the cover for the stagecoach window. “Sod off, James!” Tillie said as she pulled the blind down, effectively blocking her face from James, one of her father’s men.

“Don’t pick on her,” Henry said. He was another of her father’s men, who had been assigned to accompany her on her journey.

“Aww,” James said from outside of the window where he was riding. “I don’t mean

anything by it."

Tillie knew that James was just trying to make her feel better about things, but she wasn't in the mood for his comedy today. They were a week into their long journey, and with each passing day, Tillie found herself growing more and more listless. She spent most nights crying herself to sleep, but she was starting to feel the sadness drain out of her. The problem was that anger had taken its place.

Tillie was so angry that she could barely see straight.

"Leave her be," Henry said. Tillie looked out of her left window. She couldn't see Henry's face, but his horse was right next to her, and the sight of the chestnut fur made her slightly calmer. Unlike James, who liked to tease her at every turn, Henry was the more serious of the two.

He'd also been present when Tillie had begged her father not to send her away. He'd heard her cry, beg, and plead with him, and he'd watched as her father heartlessly turned her away. Her pain hadn't mattered to him as much as brokering a business deal.

Tillie was being sent off to northern California to marry one of her father's business associates. Her stomach turned at the thought. She'd never met this man, but she knew that he was old enough to be her father, maybe even her grandfather, and that made her sick.

Tillie sighed heavily and slumped back in the seat. They were just a few days from her new home, and every night, when they stopped to rest, she thought about grabbing the gold that her father sent with her and running away.

But Tillie couldn't do it. She wasn't naïve

enough to think that she would get very far. Even with a mountain full of gold, Tillie didn't know how to survive. She came from a well-to-do family.

Her mother had passed when Tillie was young, and she'd mostly been raised by her governess. She'd been taught how to be a wife and run a house. None of the skills she had learned would serve her well if she decided to take to the wilderness.

She sighed and leaned back against the cushioned seat of her stagecoach. Her eyes were heavy, and the rolling of the stagecoach downhill was starting to lull her to sleep. She couldn't remember the last time that she had gotten any sort of true rest.

Her father had organized her trip so that she would have a comfortable tavern to stop at every night. It was his way of trying to broker peace between them, and while she was

grateful, it wasn't going to change how she felt about things.

The stops were also adding days to their travels, which almost felt worse than if she had just traveled to California directly. Her father had thought that she was too delicate for such a journey, and she hated that he was likely right.

They were traveling at the slowest pace possible, and Tillie could feel the long journey in her bones. Not only was she lacking sleep, but her back and legs ached from sitting for so many hours, and her corset stays had been pressing incessantly into her ribs. She wished that she could have dressed more casually, but her maids had only packed lovely, thick, formal gowns.

Tillie pressed her head against the window and sighed. She allowed the cool, spring air to warm her face. Tillie might not have wanted

to go to California, but she was fascinated by all the different places that she had seen along the way.

Tillie had never been anywhere outside of her home in Arizona, which she liked well enough, but a small part of her, the part that still clung to childish things, liked the adventure of it all.

The stagecoach gave a thick jerk which caused Tillie's eyes to spring open as she was nearly catapulted from her seat and out the window.

"My God!" she said, grabbing onto the frame and pushing herself back into her seat.

"Sorry!" the driver yelled out. "Hit a hole there."

“Are you alright?” Henry asked. He leaned down slightly so that she could see his face. His cheeks were ruddy from the wind, and his blue eyes sparkled.

“You alright?” he asked when Tillie didn’t immediately answer.

Tillie nodded. “Fine,” she said. “Was nearly underfoot of your horse, but luckily, I caught myself.”

She could hear both Henry and James laugh, and the sound of it comforted her. Though she was being sent away from her home to marry a man she was not interested in being tied to, she was glad that for the next few days, her companions were James and Henry.

Both men were only slightly older than her,

and they had worked for her father since they were boys. Tillie didn't have any siblings, but she always thought of the two men like brothers.

"Are you going to be mad at me for the entire trip?" James asked. She couldn't see his horse due to her closed blind, but she could still hear him.

She laughed and shook her head at his words. James was good-natured, and she knew that he was simply trying to lift her spirits. James was the jokester of the two men. He was also the oldest, and with a wife and a baby at home, Tillie had been surprised that he'd agreed to accompany her on this trip.

She'd even heard a rumor that his wife was expecting another child.

“I promise not to be mad if you promise to name your next child after me,” she said.

She could hear James’ deep, booming laugh. “What if we have a son?” he asked.

“Tillie is a great name for a boy or a girl,” she told him. It really wasn’t, and James knew that. She was glad that the two of them were able to overcome the tension. In truth, Tillie wasn’t mad at him. She was angry at the situation.

“I don’t know why I put up with the two of you,” Henry grumbled. Unlike James, Henry was a quiet man who rarely spoke unless he was asked a direct question. He’d always been much more sensitive than James, which made Tillie gravitate towards him. When she was younger, she had been absolutely moony-eyed about Henry, but he’d never shown her the slightest bit of interest.

The stagecoach lurched again, and Tillie felt her stomach go right along with it.

“Lots of holes,” the driver yelled.

He hit another one, and this time Tillie had to grab ahold of the window frame once more to keep herself upright.

“What is going on?” she muttered to herself. Tillie hadn’t been on many drives, but she’d been on enough to know that if they hit too many of these holes in the road, then they were going to break an axle, which would be a very large problem, especially considering that they were in the middle of nowhere—likely miles from the nearest town.

“Something’s not right,” Henry said.

“It’s just a bad stretch,” James countered back.

“This road is barely traveled,” Henry told him. “We shouldn’t be having this many issues.”

Tillie wasn’t sure that she was supposed to be hearing any of this, but she also suspected that they didn’t have much of a choice. There was another lurch of the coach, and this time Tillie swore that she heard wood crack.

“What’s happening?” she called out. Her heart was starting to beat quickly in her chest as she thought about all of the things that could be going on outside of the stagecoach. She felt like a sitting duck in her gilded cage.

“It’s nothing,” James said. “Just a stretch of

bad road."

"Something snapped," Tillie said. "I'm sure of it." There was something in the air that was making Tillie's nerves stand on edge. She knew that something was wrong. She knew it with every bone in her body.

"It's fine," James said, but he was starting to seem worried. She could hear it in his voice. There was an undertone of panic that hadn't been there before.

Just as he said the words, they hit another hole. Only this one was a deep crater in the ground that caused the stagecoach axel to buckle and crunch. Tillie screamed as the entire car lurched forward as the wheel snapped. She was sure that she was going to be crushed by the coach.

But luckily, that didn't happen. The stagecoach eventually settled, and Tillie was thrown back against her seat.

"Tillie!" Henry and James both shouted. They had jumped off their horses, and she could see their faces peeking in through the windows, the glass of which was shattered from the impact of the stagecoach hitting the ground.

"I'm fine," she said. She pressed a hand to her chest in an attempt to calm herself. "What happened?"

"The idiot driver hit another hole. I think it snapped a wheel," James said.

"An axel," Henry responded.

Tillie breathed a small sigh of relief. She was worried about what would happen to them without the coach, but she was glad that everyone was fine. That was all she could think before she heard gunshots.

“What was that?” she asked again, even though she knew what that sound was. Tillie was scared. She had heard about people getting robbed on the road. It was why her father had mapped out a route that was less traveled and had sent Henry and James with her as protection.

Tillie reached out towards the door. She didn’t like sitting in the stagecoach. But just as she was about to pull the door open, Henry pressed it shut. “Stay inside,” he said. “Try and find a place to hide.”

Tillie looked around. The stagecoach was big and spacious, but there was nowhere to hide.

Tillie did the only thing that she could think to do at that moment, which was grab the gold and hid under the seat of the coach. She didn't know what was going to happen next, but she was certain that Henry and James would take care of it.

If she just stayed hidden, she knew that everything would be alright. It had to be.

Chapter 2

Tarak couldn't get comfortable. Normally, when outside with the sun on his skin and the wind stirring the air around him, he felt most at home. Today though, something was different. The air felt heavy, and the small hairs on his forearms were standing at attention.

"We shouldn't be here," Tarak muttered. He was at the front of his tribe, leading them towards home.

"What?" his brother Taza, the head of their tribe asked.

Tarak hadn't meant to speak aloud, but the words had slipped through his lips before he

could think about what they might mean.

“You don’t feel that?” Tarak asked.

Taza chuckled slightly and shook his head. “You are letting your mind run away with you,” he said.

Tarak felt anger starting to form in his chest. He was used to not being taken seriously by his brother. It was the dynamic that existed between them since they were children running in between their mother’s feet. Now that Taza was chief of their tribe, he was more careful about how he treated Tarak, but sometimes, he forgot himself.

“The air is trying to warn us,” Tarak said. “Don’t you feel it?” Tarak’s feelings of unease had grown the further they rode, and he was sure now, more than ever, that the Earth was

sending him a warning. He wasn't such a fool that he didn't think to heed it.

Taza clearly didn't feel it.

Or he isn't open to hearing it, Tarak thought. He was irritated by his brother, which was nothing new. Taza was a good chief. He was fair, and though he believed in the ways of the Apache, he was also open to the new ways. Tarak knew that his brother was the best person to lead their tribe. That didn't mean that he followed him with blind loyalty.

"You're tired from traveling," Taza said. "It's been a long journey."

This time Tarak gave a grunt of agreement. It had been a long journey. They'd been gone from home for nearly a month, but Tarak didn't mind it. He wasn't built for staying

home. He was a warrior, and his place was riding at his chief's side.

"We shouldn't have left home," Tarak muttered. Taza's eyes hardened as his good-natured smile dropped.

"We needed the white man's medicine," Taza said.

Tarak bit his tongue to stop himself from reminding Taza that the white men were nothing more than devils who they should stay far away from. They brought nothing to the Apache people but pain and death.

The white men had been on the land since Tarak was a young boy. His father and grandfather had first tried to broker peace with them, and then, they had fought them. Now, Taza was chief, and he was struggling to

decide whether he too should fight the white men or embrace them.

“We wouldn’t need the medicine if you hadn’t invited them into our home,” Tarak said. He could see the effect his words had on his brother. His shoulders tensed, and Tarak was sure that he would have struck out at him if he could.

“Be careful what you speak, brother,” Taza said. His tone was calm, but Tarak knew him well enough to hear the anger in it. They were riding at the head of the tribe. Close enough to be seen, but not close enough for their conversation to be overheard.

Before Tarak could say anything else, he caught the glint of something bright in the hilly landscape ahead. It was so far away that Tarak might not have noticed. But years of being on alert and his warrior skills made him extra cautious, especially when they traveled.

“Halt!” he yelled. He pulled back on the reins of his horse to bring him to a stop.

“Tarak,” Taza bit out, clearly angry that his brother would cause the tribe to stop moving forward. Normally, Tarak wouldn’t have done such a thing. After all, he wasn’t chief. But they had women and children in their party, and he knew they needed to be extra careful.

“Look ahead,” he said.

His brother released a heavy sigh of frustration, but he did as Tarak asked. “What is that?”

Tarak squinted in the sun, and when he caught sight of what was before them, he felt his

heart stop in his chest. “Guns,” he whispered, horror overtaking him. “They have weapons.”

There was a tittering amongst the group as the riders behind them tried to understand why they had stopped.

“What’s happening?” Chalipun, Tarak and Taza’s cousin asked, as he rode in between the two brothers. “Why have we stopped?”

“There’s something ahead,” Taza said.

“There are guns ahead,” Tarak told his cousin.

The color drained from Chalipun’s face. He knew how dangerous guns were more than any of them. He’d lost his father to the white men’s weapons, and he himself had been shot

by a trader. It had been simple luck that he had survived.

“We need to find a way around,” Chalipun said. “We have women with us, and we aren’t much of a match for their guns.”

It was clearly the opposite of what Taza wanted to hear. His dark eyes became fierce, and Tarak could practically see the spirits of past Apache chief’s taking over. “We aren’t cowards,” he said. Tarak watched his hand go to his thigh towards the long, sharp knife that sat in his belt. Tarak’s own hand was straying towards his belt, where he kept his small axe.

“We don’t know how many there are or what they are doing,” Chalipun said. There was a tinge of fear in his voice, which Tarak knew he would hate. Like the rest of them, Chalipun was a warrior. He would gladly have gone to battle with the white men if he thought they had a hope of beating them.

“They are robbers,” Taza said. He had moved his reins to one hand. It was clear that no matter what they said, Taza was going to go forth and take matters into his own hands.

“You don’t know that,” Tarak said, but as he looked closer at the stagecoach, he suspected that his brother was correct. This area was ripe for bandits.

“There could be women and children in that coach,” Taza said.

“There are women in our party,” Tarak reminded him. “And you are chief. You can’t just run off…” Tarak trailed off. He didn’t want to think about his brother doing something that could get him killed. That would leave Tarak as chief, which was a role he did not care to fill.

Several of the men had gathered round the three of them, and as Tarak looked, he wasn't surprised to see that every single one of them was starting to go for their weapons. They would fight and die for his brother without question.

"Stay with the women," Taza said as he released a yelp and galloped off towards the top of the hill.

"He's going to get himself killed!" Chalipun said. Tarak had to agree. Already, the white men were firing at his brother and his men. "What is he thinking?"

Tarak groaned. He wanted nothing to do with the white men's problems. They were returning from a trading mission, which they'd had to go on because a bout of smallpox had

started spreading through their camp. Taza had been desperate to trade for some medicine, despite the calls for him to stay with the tribe and offer the ancestors tribute for healing.

Tarak watched as his brother dodged bullets as he navigated his horse up the valley. Tarak reached for the axe on his belt and gripped the handle with one hand before leaning forward on his horse. He'd had his horse for years. They had been through many fights together, and he trusted that he would get him through this one as well.

"Not you too?" his cousin said.

"He's our chief," Tarak said. "And my brother. If he's to die, my place is by his side." It was the last thing that Tarak said before he galloped off after his brother.

Now that Tarak had decided to act, his mind was sharp and focused. He'd been fighting since he was a boy, and his body was well-honed to it. He dodged a few stray bullets and pushed his horse to go faster in order to catch up with his brother. When he did, he saw that his tribe was engaged in combat with more white men than he had assumed.

"Taza!" he yelled, alerting his brother to the man behind him. As Tarak yelled, he released his axe into the air. It landed with a thick clunk, cutting through skin and bone, as it embedded itself into the man's back.

The sound of a woman's screams startled and distracted him.

Before Tarak could think too much on it, another man was leveling a gun at his head. Tarak wouldn't have time to move his horse quickly enough to avoid the bullet speeding

towards him, so he made the decision to slide off the side of his horse, landing with a hard grunt as his shoulder absorbed the impact.

As he fell, he grabbed the long knife that he kept by his side. He'd lost track of his axe, in the melee, which didn't appear to be over. Tarak jumped to his feet, ready for a fight, and he didn't have to wait too long to get it.

An enemy horse bounded upon him, and Tarek immediately whipped his knife around, slicing the legs of the rider. Hot blood splattered across his face. He knew that he should have sunk his knife in the horse, but he always tried to avoid slaughtering animals unless he had to.

From the screams that the man released, he was sure that he wouldn't be coming after anyone any time soon.

Tarak didn't allow himself too much time to think. His eyes did a quick scan of the parameter, and he immediately spotted a young, white woman who was being dragged out of the stagecoach. He immediately knew that she was being pulled out against her will as she struggled against her attacker.

Tarak started running towards her. The sounds of the fighting were drowned out as he homed in on his mission. The sound of gunfire had ceased, and he smiled to himself. Guns weren't ideal, but the good thing about them was that they eventually ran out of ammunition, and white men tended to rely on them too much.

Tarak was sure that his brother and his men would have no problem taking care of the remainder, which would give Tarak the ability to help the struggling young woman.

"Let me go!" she yelled as she struggled

against the man. He had her by the hair and was dragging her hard against his body.

Tarak didn't have a clear shot to throw his knife and ensure that he didn't hit the woman.

As he closed in, he knew that he was going to have a hard time just fighting the man. He had a knife against the woman's throat, and every time she struggled, a thin red line appeared across her creamy neck.

"Unhand her," Tarak said as he came before the man. He raised his knife and took a fighting stance. Tarak was sure that he was going to have one chance to save this woman's life, and he wasn't going to miss it.

The man said nothing. He simply laughed at Tarak and tightened his grip. He yanked the back of the woman's hair hard, causing her to

yelp in pain. Tarak didn't look at her, though. He kept his focus on the man ahead of him.

"And what are you going to do about it if I don't?" he asked. He pressed the knife closer to the woman's throat, and Tarak expected to hear a whimper of fear. When he didn't, he quickly glanced over at her.

Her cheeks were flushed, and Tarak was surprised to see anger in her eyes.

"He's not the one you need to worry about!" she said, and Tarak immediately felt his heart drop.

Chapter 3

All of the anger that Tillie had felt for the past few weeks had come to a head. She was terrified, in pain, and before she could stop to think about how dangerous her actions were, she brought the heel of her boot, the part with a slight lift, down hard on the man's foot.

Tillie heard him scream loudly over the crunch of her boot, and she immediately dug her elbow into the soft middle of his gut so that she could get away.

It wasn't enough though, and the man grabbed at the back of her dress, tearing part of it away.

Panic started to flood through Tillie, and real

fear started to form as she realized that this man wasn't going to release her until he murdered her. Before she could do anything further, she felt something sticky spray across her the back of her head and the side of her face, and she immediately knew that it was blood.

That was too much for Tillie, and for the first time since her stagecoach was attacked, and before she could stop herself, she started screaming. The native man who was standing before her looked shocked.

His dark eyes widened as Tillie released the most primal scream that she had ever heard in her entire life. If it wasn't her screaming, she would think that someone was being murdered.

"It's alright," the native man said as Tillie took a breath in between screams. He raised his hands, which were devoid of weapons. "I'm

not going to cause you harm."

Tillie immediately stopped screaming. Her chest was rising and falling quickly, and she felt as though she couldn't get enough air into her chest. Her head was swimming, and she could feel large sobs starting to take shape inside of her.

She briefly looked around, and the sight of James and Henry's bodies laid on the ground swimming in a pool of blood nearly bowed Tillie.

The man walked towards her. His dark hair was pulled back from his face, which was handsome and chiseled.

"Are you hurt?" the man asked. His voice was soft.

Tillie felt a sharp pain in her neck from where the bandit had placed the knife. She pressed her fingers towards the cut and felt blood dripping slightly down her neck.

“I’m bleeding,” she said as she pulled her fingers away. She was shocked to see it. At the moment, she had been so focused on survival that she hadn’t had too much time to think. Now, she felt completely shocked by the entire thing, which felt silly. But Tillie had never experienced physical violence before.

“The cuts don’t look deep. They’ll heal on their own,” the man said.

Tillie nodded. She didn’t know what else to do. She closed her eyes for a moment and blinked slowly as she tried to calm herself. It was a trick that her governess had taught her to deal with her anger when she was a young

girl, and it was coming in handy now.

“Tarak!” the sound of another deep, male voice caused Tillie’s eyes to fly open. An older native man was standing before Tillie, and she felt herself shrinking away from his dark eyes. This man was slightly taller than the one who had saved her.

He was also covered in blood. It was splattered like paint across his skin and mattered into the top of his dark hair. Tillie found the man terrifying, and she wanted to run back into the stagecoach, close her eyes, and pray that someone else would come and save her.

The man turned his dark eyes on her, and they widened slightly.

“They were after the girl,” the man who had

saved her, Tarak, said.

The other man said nothing, but his eyes stared her up and down, and Tillie immediately knew that he was wondering why this group of men had decided to target her.

“Are you hurt, miss?” the man asked. Tillie hated how surprised she was by his manners. Tillie liked to think of herself as a progressive woman, who saw the Native Americans as people instead of savages, but she had never met one so closely, and she couldn’t help the twinge of fear that she got when she looked at them.

“I don’t think she can talk,” Tarak said. His words angered Tillie. She just watched him kill a man in front of her, and two of her friends were lying dead, not more than a stone’s throw away from her feet. It was a wonder that she wasn’t still screaming, and she thought that she could be commended for

such bravery.

The other man said nothing as he took inventory of Tillie. She squared off her shoulders and puffed up her chest. She had already shown her weakness, but she was determined not to show any more.

“I can talk just fine,” she said. Her soft words losing some of the snipe that she had wanted them to hold.

Tarak raised a brow at her, clearly recalling how she had barely said more than two words to him after he saved her life.

“Glad to hear it,” the other man said.

There was a brief, tense silence between the

three. The silence gave Tillie a moment to look around. There were several other men kneeling about checking the pockets of the bandits. When one moved towards James, Tillie rushed forward.

“Leave him be!” she scolded.

All the men jumped back slightly, clearly taken aback by her ferocity. Logically, Tillie knew that James was dead, but in her heart, she had to be certain.

Tillie started to lean down to check for breath when she felt a hand on her shoulder pulling her slightly back.

“He’s gone,” the man said.

“You don’t know that!” Tillie said. She felt silly for speaking it. James wasn’t making a sound, and from the look of things, he’d taken a bullet to the chest. Tears filled Tillie’s eyes as she recalled James’s soft smile.

“Was he a friend?” the man asked.

Tillie couldn’t speak, so she simply gave him a short nod. Tillie needed a moment to try and calm the grief that felt as though it was going to undertake her at any moment. She said a little prayer for both James and Henry as she made them a promise. When she returned home, she would ensure that their families were well taken care of.

It was the least she could do, considering that they sacrificed their lives for her. Tillie sniffled slightly before getting back to her feet. She was sure that if either man had been alive, they would have scolded her for turning her back on the men.

But something in Tillie told her that these men didn't mean her any harm. After all, they had saved her life.

As Tillie walked towards the two men, she caught parts of their conversation, and it immediately made her frown.

"We can't leave her here," the older man said. Tillie would have to catch his name at the very least to give him her thanks.

"We've saved her life," he said. "What happens to her now is not for us to be worried about."

"She's just a young woman, and we are miles away from anywhere." Tillie felt her heart drop to her stomach, and her fear was

heightened.

Tillie hadn't had a moment to think about what she was going to do now that her guards and her driver were dead. Tillie was miles from home, and while she had money, she wasn't equipped to make it several miles on her own.

"She's trouble," Tarak said. "Don't forget the warning I had before we came upon her coach."

"Excuse me," Tillie said, jumping into the conversation. "May I speak?" she asked. Tillie was going to say her piece whether they liked it or not, but she thought it was best to be on her politest behavior since she needed their help.

The older man gave her a small smile. He was

clearly more open to the realities of her plight. Tarak didn't seem to care one bit, which confused Tillie. She didn't understand why he would save her if he planned to leave her vulnerable out on the road.

"Of course," the older man said.

"If you can," Tarak spoke at the same time.

Tillie released a small breath in an attempt to calm herself. She suspected that Tarak was trying to get a rise out of her. No doubt to show the other man that she was not worth his time.

"I have gold," she told them. Tillie wasn't sure if she should be so open about the wealth that she was carrying, but she was banking on these men being of good character. She felt confident that they were. They'd come out of

nowhere to save her life when they didn't have to.

"We have no desire for your money," Tarak said. He spit the words out with such anger that Tillie was scared that she had offended him in some way, which had not been her intention at all. "Gold is evil," he said. "It's no wonder you attracted such danger to yourself."

Tillie bit her lip so hard that she could practically taste blood in her mouth. "I didn't mean to offend," she said.

The older man gave the younger one a stern look. It was clear that he was the one in charge, but Tillie could tell that the younger man's opinion mattered a great deal. She might not have to fully win him over to get their help, but something told her that her life would be easier if she did.

“We don’t take gold,” the older man said. His voice was calm as he explained that to her.

Tillie didn’t know that, and she was worried because she had absolutely nothing else to provide them.

“My father is a wealthy man,” she said. “If you help me get back home, I am sure that he will be able to get you anything that you want or need.” Tillie hated the desperation in her voice. The last time she had begged for anything, it had been for her father not to send her away in the first place.

“What makes you think he has anything that we want?” Tarak asked again.

Tillie felt tears welling up in her eyes as she

considered what would happen if these men refused to help her. She would be left on her own, and she didn't think that she would be able to make it home. She didn't even think that she would be able to stay alive for much longer. Tillie hated that she was going to have to beg these people for more help, but she didn't have much choice.

"Please," Tillie said. "I barely know where I am. If you leave me here, alone, I will die." Tillie was prideful, but she was also a realist. She knew that she couldn't survive on her own, and she wasn't going to allow her pride to get her killed.

"We can't make such a decision alone," Tarak said to the older man. It was clear if he had his way, they would be back on their horses, making their way back to their tribe.

"He's right," the older man said. "Your presence will affect all of us."

Tillie nodded. She didn't like that her fate was being left up to chance, but she didn't have much of a choice. "I swear that I won't cause you any trouble," Tillie promised. "Those men wanted the gold, and I would happily have given it to them if they would have gone about their way."

Tillie left out the part where she recognized one of the bandits as a man who worked for her father, and she especially didn't tell them about how she was fairly certain that he had gotten away. She was sure that such knowledge would cause them to leave her.

"We will speak with our men," the older man said.

Tillie nodded. "Wait!" she said as the two men turned their backs on her. "What are your

names?”

The older man smiled at her, and she was taken aback by how handsome he was, even covered in blood. “This is Tarak, and I’m Chief Taza. We are of the Apache tribe.”

“I’m Tillie,” she told him. “And no matter what your tribe decides, I want to thank you, truly, for saving my life.”

The man, Chief Taza, gave her a small, kind nod before joining Tarak.

Now, Tillie had to wait and pray and hope that these men would take pity on her. Because if they didn’t, she was sure that she was as good as dead.

Chapter 4

Tarak and his brother had a difficult relationship. Tarak respected him as chief, and he loved him as his brother, but sometimes, most of the time, he didn't understand him. Tarak and Taza had both learned about the dangers of the white men.

They'd seen it. Their father and their uncle had both been killed by the white man's weapons, and just a month ago, their tribe had been made ill by the white man's sickness.

"You've brought danger upon all of us," Chalipun said. Taza had done what he'd told the young woman, Tillie, he would do. He was speaking to members of their traveling party about accompanying her to her father's home.

“She’s a woman,” Taza said. “A scared one who watched her friends get massacred.”

There was pity in Taza’s voice, and as Tarak watched some of the men who had fought alongside himself and his brother, he understood why they felt for the woman. He didn’t think he would soon forget how she had wept over the bodies of the two men.

It had been clear to anyone that she had cared about them. Tarak had seen enough death in his life to know what it felt like to grieve. He felt for the woman, but he didn’t think she belonged with them.

“We saved her life,” he said to his brother. “We’ve done more than our share for her.”

“If we leave her, she’ll die,” one of the men

said. “Look at her clothes, at the paleness of her skin. She offered us gold.”

“We don’t take the money of her people,” Chalipun said. There was fire and conviction in his voice, which Tarak understood. That gold had led to slaughter. Of that, Tarak was sure. He couldn’t understand why the young woman was on the road with so much gold to begin with.

“That’s not what I was saying,” the man said. His olive cheeks turned slightly pink at the misunderstanding.

“What he’s saying is that the young woman is desperate. If we do not offer her protection, then we will be sentencing her to death,” Taza said. There was a heaviness to his words that Tarak didn’t like.

He didn't like the way that his brother's dark eyes looked at him. They were imploring him to see the reason in what he was saying. And Tarak hated that he could. He wasn't the type of man who could leave a young woman to a death sentence, even though he didn't believe that what they were doing was necessarily the right thing for their tribe.

"There's a town a day's ride away," Tarak said. "We can take her there to find help."

"I'd be willing to do that, "Chalipun said. It was clear to all that he didn't like the idea, but Chalipun wasn't stupid. Even he could tell that most of the tribe agreed with Taza. They would follow their chief because they believed he was right, and they respected the decision.

But Taza wasn't willing to compromise, and he shook his head. "She's a young woman, and the men in that town will do unspeakable things to her once they see how much gold she

has. We all know how her people view gold….”

There was a grumble of agreement amongst the men, and Tarak groaned internally. He could see the tide turning away from him and Chalipun and towards his brother. His men were brave warriors, and they would all feel it was their duty to deliver this woman safely to her family.

“You want to grant her a kindness that her people would not give to us,” Chalipun said. “Think of all the things they have done to our people. To our women and children!”

Chalipun had a point, and people were starting to mutter in agreement. No one wanted to leave this woman to die, but they also didn’t wish to risk themselves.

“We can’t punish her for what her people have done in the past,” Taza said. “And to mistreat her simply for those slights would make us no better than those who have done the same to us.”

The men were instantly back on their chief’s side. Tarak wasn’t surprised. His brother inspired the loyalty and love of his men and their tribe. He’d been chief for five years since their father had been killed, and he’d made their tribe stronger and more resilient.

Tarak looked over to where the young woman, Tillie was sitting. The men talked around him, and he was sure that they were arguing about what to do with her.

At the end of it, Tarak knew that his brother would get his way. He didn’t see the point in adding anything additional. Unlike Taza, Tarak wasn’t much of an orator. The men of their tribe respected him for his prowess in

battle and his ability to hunt game. He wasn't the one they turned to for inspiration or to plan a battle.

Plus, as Tarak took in the woman's delicate features, he was starting to feel himself agreeing with Taza. Even from far away, Tillie's petiteness was clear. Tarak hadn't gotten too close, but he was sure that she was only about the height of his shoulder.

Her hands had been small and childlike, and her skin was the color of fresh cream. Like Taza, Tarak knew that this woman had no chance of navigating the wilds of western California on her own.

That didn't mean that Tarak believed that her presence was a good idea. He couldn't forget the warning that he'd felt right before he saw two of the men ambushing her stagecoach.

But he also couldn't forget the way she had screamed when she had taken stock of the massacre that laid at her feet. The sound of it had been primal as she saw her friends dead, and it had tugged at Tarak's heart in a way he didn't care to think too closely about.

"It's settled," Taza said. His voice interrupted Tarak's thoughts, and he drew his gaze away from Tillie and back towards his brother. "We will take the woman to her father."

"Do we even know where that is?" Tarak asked. They hadn't gotten a great deal of information from the woman, except for her name, when they saved her. "She might not even be traveling in the same direction."

It was a valid point that Taza couldn't ignore. Tarak could see his brother's mind turning this new point over and over in his head. "We will split up," he said. "Some of the men will guide

the women and children home, and the rest of us will travel wherever Tillie calls home."

Chalipun opened his mouth to object, but Taza gave him a look that made it clear he was not open to hearing any more of his thoughts. Tarak sighed as his brother began talking about logistics for the split.

"You can't agree with this," Chalipun said. No one was paying attention to the two of them as they split from the larger group. "You know that this woman is nothing more than trouble. Same as all the rest of her people."

Tarak didn't disagree. He felt as if he were caught between two rocks, and each one was exerting more and more pressure on him. He agreed with Chalipun that Tillie was bound to bring them nothing more than trouble, but like Taza, he also couldn't figure out what else to do with her.

“Taza will listen to you if you try and reason with him,” Chalipun said.

This made Tarak laugh. “Taza will do what he thinks is best for everyone. He’s already made up his mind.”

Chalipun’s face hardened in a way that Tarak had never seen before. His cousin could be impulsive, but now, Tarak was wondering if he was also dangerous. “Your brother is going to regret this,” Chalipun said before storming off.

Tarak stared at the back of his cousin’s head as he walked away, worried about the words he had spoken. Taza was still talking to the men, and when Tarak looked back towards the stagecoach, he could see Tillie sitting next to it. She was seated with her knees pulled up and her arms wrapped around them.

Tarak felt a bit of sympathy for the woman. He hadn't thought about the fact that they had left her amongst all of the bodies.

Before he could think too much about it, Tarak started walking towards her. His strides were long as he walked towards her, and he was standing in front of her before he knew it.

"Have you decided?" she asked, lifting her head from where it had rested against her legs. Tarak felt his heart tug slightly when he saw the tear streaks on her face. He felt bad about the fact that he hadn't considered what staying amongst the bodies might have done to her.

Tarak looked closely at the young woman. Her hair was the color of the gold that she had offered to them. He imagined that it had been

plaited, but now, pieces of it were covered in blood, and the curls were framing her face. Her features were delicate, and her eyes were the color of the sky. She was pretty enough.

“What have you decided?” she asked.

Tarak didn’t know what to say. He assumed that Taza wanted to speak to her about his plan.

“Where does your father live?” he asked.

Tillie’s blue eyes livened up immediately. “You are going to help me?” she asked.

“Depends on where your father lives,” he said. It didn’t depend. Taza had made the decision that he would be helping her no matter what.

“Arizona,” she said. “Right outside of Tubac.”

Tarak’s heart stopped. “Tubac?” he asked.

Tillie nodded. “Just outside of the town,” she said. “My father owns a large ranch.”

Tarak couldn’t believe it. Tubac was a town well-known by his tribe. The land had once belonged to them until the white men came out West. They took the land and built on it. According to his father, who had been a young man at the time, things had been good between the groups for a while. Until the white men got greedy and wanted more. More land. More gold. Just more.

Then, the slaughtering had started.

Tarak couldn't help the disgust that overtook his face as he looked at Tillie. If her father owned a large ranch, it was land that he had stolen from his people. Land that he probably killed for.

"Taza will tell you what he's decided," Tarak said. He turned to walk back down the hill towards his people. Any semblance of pity that he had felt for this woman was gone. Chalipun had been correct when he prophesized that she would bring them nothing but destruction.

Tarak was now more convinced of that than ever.

Chapter 5

Every muscle in Tillie's body was tense as she stood before the Apache tribe. Chief Taza was looking at her with a kind smile. He was a tall man with a long, dark braid. He was dressed in a buckskin vest, which was covered in blood from the fight. He didn't seem to mind.

The rest of the men were dressed similarly, but they weren't looking at Tillie with such kindness.

"I want to thank you again," Tillie said. "For all that you have done for me. No matter what your decision, I hope that you will accept my gratitude."

"No gratitude is necessary," he said. "We are

warriors. It would go against everything we believe in to leave a woman to fend for herself from such fiends."

Tillie smiled and nodded. She meant what she said. She was truly grateful for what the men had done for her. She was certain that she would not be alive if it wasn't for them. Now, she prayed that whatever they decided next, wouldn't condemn her to death for a second time.

"May I ask what you have decided?" Tillie tried to infuse her voice with as much strength as she could. She promised herself that she would not weep and beg if the men decided that she was more trouble than they needed.

"We will escort you safely back to your home," he told her. Tillie immediately felt herself calm. She couldn't believe that they were going to help her. After Tarak had come to speak with her, she had assumed that they

would be telling her the opposite.

She shivered as she thought about the way he looked at her. There had been such contempt in his eyes that she suspected that he could have left her and felt no remorse. “Thank you!” she told them. “If there is anything that my family can do to help you, please let me know, and I will ensure that my father helps you in whatever way he can.”

“We want nothing from you,” Tarak said again.

Tillie felt herself growing frustrated with him. She was trying her best to be thankful for what the men were doing, but he was making it difficult. They had agreed to help her, so she didn’t understand all of the hostility he was showing towards her.

“Still,” Tillie said, “I would like to thank you in some way.” That was the truth. She wanted to do something for these people. She was sure that her father would as well, especially considering that they would be returning his only daughter.

He wouldn’t know that she was missing for at least a week. She was due to reach her new husband the day after tomorrow, and when she didn’t, she was sure that he would send a letter to her father. The thought of him worrying made her sick.

“Do you know how to ride?” Taza asked her. She wasn’t sure if she was supposed to refer to him as chief or not.

“I do,” she said. “If you don’t have a horse, I think that one of the stagecoach ones is still well.” The other horse had been shot and killed along with the driver and her friends. Tillie almost spewed the little bit of food she

had eaten across the ground.

“We don’t have saddles,” Tarak said. “I assume that you don’t know how to ride without one.”

Tillie didn’t know how to ride without a saddle, but she hated the smug look on Tarak’s face. She liked Taza well enough. He seemed like a kind man who wanted to help her. Tarak was also helping her, though it seemed reluctant, and he seemed as though he wanted to humiliate her at every turn.

“I can ride fine,” she said. She folded her hands over her arms and leveled Tarak with a look that she hoped would let him know that despite what he might think, she was much tougher than she looked. “Besides,” she told him. “There are saddles on the other horse.”

Henry’s horse had fallen just outside of the

stagecoach. “We should go and gather the things you will need,” Taza said. “We’ll need to get moving as soon as possible.”

Tillie nodded. She understood. The sun was getting lower and lower in the sky, and she assumed that there was a need to get back to their travels before darkness came. Tillie didn’t know much about the Apache, but she knew that they weren’t going to be staying at taverns.

“Tarak will come with you,” he told her.

Tillie said nothing. She didn’t want Tarak to come with her as she went back to the stagecoach, but she assumed it was best not to argue. Taza was showing her immense kindness, and she would do whatever she could to not be a burden on anyone.

Tarak said nothing as he stormed back up the hill. His long legs ate the distance much quicker than Tillie's, and she practically had to run to keep up with him. She suspected that he was moving quickly on purpose so that she would have to ask him to slow down. What he didn't know was that Tillie had a stubborn streak a mile wide and three deep, and she would sooner run than ask for him to slow down.

"Get what you need," Tarak said. "And remember that we don't have stagecoaches."

Tillie bristled at his words, but she went quickly inside of the coach to where her trunk was stored. She'd kept the gold tucked in her arms when she escaped and was starting to realize how cumbersome the box was. Sifting through the many gowns, petticoats, and boots, she searched for a small satchel that she knew she had packed.

“Got it,” she said. The satchel was made from a red satin and embroidered with beading and gold thread. It went with one of her formal dresses, but it was deep and sturdy and would be much easier to have by her side.

Tillie didn’t know what else to take with her. She didn’t have a pack, but she found a slightly larger bag that might hold one more dress. She grabbed a simply linen one and packed it away.

Once Tillie had gotten her things, she moved back towards where Tarak was standing. Her route back took her around the bodies of James and Henry, and she immediately froze as she saw them.

It felt surreal to be standing over their bodies. James had been joking with her just a short time ago. She felt tears welling up in her eyes as she recalled how she had joked that he better name his newborn son or daughter after

her.

James had fallen on his back. She could see the gunshot wound in his chest, and since it was the only mark on his body, she assumed it was a fatal shot that killed him. Her lip trembled as she looked into his eyes.

Henry was next to him, and Tillie wondered if he had rushed forward to give his fallen friend aid. He had fallen face down, and Tillie was secretly grateful for it. She didn't think she could handle seeing his face. The last time they had spoken, Henry had urged her to find a place to hide.

He'd promised her that she would be safe. She had been naïve to believe him at the time.

A small sob escaped from her lips, and she pressed her free hand against her mouth to

stifle the others. Her grief was like a wide canyon, and she worried that if she got closer to the edge of it, she would fall in and never escape.

Plus, she wasn't alone, and she didn't care to have Tarak thinking her weaker than he already did. It was too late though, and the sound of her cry had alerted Tarak to where she was standing.

She expected his ridicule, so Tillie was surprised when she felt the warm weight of Tarak's hand on her shoulder. She tried not to tense at the gesture. She'd never been touched so informally by a man before, and even though she knew that Tarak meant nothing untoward by it, everything that she had known was ingrained in her body.

"They died honorable deaths," he said.

His words made Tillie angry. “They died for nothing,” she said.

“They saved your life,” he reminded her.

That did nothing but make Tillie’s grief build. She wanted nothing more than to get some sort of revenge for her friends. She also wanted to punish her father. Her anger towards him only grew as she thought about James and Henry. Her father’s desire to marry her off had caused so much pain and damage.

“They died because of greed,” she told him. She grabbed the small satchel that now sat at her waist. The weight of it was heavy in her hands. “I think your people were right, and this is cursed.”

Tillie wanted to dump the gold, but she didn’t.

When she got home, she would gift it to James's wife. The world wasn't kind to widows, especially ones who had two additional mouths to feed. Tillie had been privileged enough to grow up with money, but she knew that this much gold was enough to keep James's family for a long while.

"Is there…" Tarak dragged his words out as if he was unsure of what he wanted to say next. "Is there something you would like to say to them? A…prayer?"

Tillie smiled. She knew that the Apache did not worship her God. It was one of the reasons people often described them as heathens.

She appreciated the effort that Tarak was making. It was made all the more poignant by the fact that he didn't like her.

“I can’t just leave them here,” Tillie said. She felt her eyes welling with tears as she thought about leaving them behind. She knew that there really wasn’t any choice, but it still made her grief all the worse.

Tarak said nothing. Tillie could feel him squirming next to her, and she knew that she was making him uncomfortable.

“What am I supposed to tell their families?” she asked. “James has a wife and a son. She’s pregnant again. Henry’s mother was my nanny as a girl. How do I explain to them that I’m alive, and they were left out here to rot away?”

Tillie felt on the verge of hysteria. Since the shooting had started, she’d been focusing on nothing more than her own survival. She’d seen James and Henry’s bodies. She had known that they were both gone, but she hadn’t had time to think too much about it.

“What you see is just their bodies,” Tarak said. His voice was soft and kind in a way that Tillie found surprising. Despite the fact that he didn’t like her, he was showing her kindness. “Their souls are no longer here.”

Tillie nodded. She released a small sob before pressing her top teeth into her bottom lip. Tarak might have been kind to her, but she still did not want him to have a view of her weakness.

“What do your people believe about the dead?” she asked.

Tarak said nothing, and Tillie immediately worried that she had overstepped. It was clear to her that Tarak, and many of the other men, did not trust her.

“We should gather the rest of your things,” he said. “The others will be waiting, and we need to get moving before the sun gets too low in the sky. We have a great deal of ground to catch up on.”

Immediately, the openness that Tarak had shown her was closed, and Tillie felt the chill of his words. But she said nothing. She looked at her friends and said a silent prayer for their souls. She prayed that they would find peace wherever they were, and she made a swift promise to bring the remaining men who had robbed them to justice.

That would have to wait, though. For now, Tillie had to focus on getting home in one piece. She believed that the Apache would do their best to make sure that she did, but she wouldn’t soon forget the ire that some of the men had sent her way.

They weren't all friends, and she needed to remember that. Tillie might not be the most worldly of people, but that was going to have to change soon if she wished to survive. She wasn't naïve enough to believe that she would join the men and charm them into liking her. She didn't want that anyway.

She would find a way to repay them for their kindness towards her, but at the end of the day, all Tillie wanted was to get home and find the men who had nearly taken her life.

"Let's go," Tillie told Tarak. Her voice was devoid of emotion as she placed her grief in a secret compartment in her heart. "There's nothing else I need here."

Chapter 6

“You seem troubled,” Taza said. They had managed to travel for several more hours after getting Tillie saddled onto one of the horses. She hadn’t said a single word since she had left her friends’ bodies. Tarak was surprised.

Though Taza had tried to slow the tribe, the men weren’t willing to slow down much, and the pace had been a hard one. Tillie had trouble catching up and was often at the end of the group with some of the younger boys, but she never complained. Not once.

It had earned her a great deal of respect amongst the men who had clearly expected her to want coddling.

Now, they were settled for the night, and Tillie had taken a pallet and curled up on the hard ground.

“I’m concerned about what the girl’s presence will do,” Tarak said.

“You are allowing Chalipun to get into your mind,” Taza grumbled. Tarak’s brother was not pleased with their cousin. He hadn’t done anything to outright defy his role as chief, but he made it obvious that he was not happy with Tillie’s presence.

“I’m not,” Tarak insisted. “I just don’t trust the girl.”

“You don’t trust her people,” Taza said.

“There’s a difference?”

Taza shook his head at Tarak. It was clear that he was frustrated by him, but Tarak was used to it. He and Taza were close, but they rarely saw eye-to-eye on things. He said nothing in response as he looked out over the fire to where Tillie was lying on her pallet. The night air was warm, but it was still crisp, and she wasn’t dressed for a night of sleeping on the hard ground.

“She’s not made one noise,” Taza said. “She’s not asked for supplies, and she’s shown nothing but gratitude towards us.”

It was the truth. Tillie was the opposite of what Tarak had expected. He should have known better. When she stood at the feet of her friends, she’d been concerned about the state of their souls, and it was obvious that leaving them behind was going to torment her.

It was why Tarak had lied to her about his beliefs. He didn't want her to carry the pain of knowing that their souls would likely walk the land forever. The knowledge of that lie was eating away at Tarak slowly.

"I don't think that she specifically is evil," Tarak admitted. He didn't. Unlike Chalipun, who saw evil everywhere, Tarak was more logical. He could see that Tillie was likely harmless. She was barely taller than a child, and though she had fought her attacker with a ferocity that had shocked Tarak, he knew that overall, she was harmless. That didn't necessarily mean that she couldn't bring them harm.

"I don't understand why you are against helping her?" Taza asked.

"I told you…" Tarak said. He could feel his

frustration growing.

Taza shook his head. “I know, I know,” he said. “You had a feeling.”

It was clear that Taza didn’t believe that any such feeling existed. “For a chief, you seem to be happy to ignore the ancestors,” Tarak said.

“The ancestors have placed Tillie in our path,” Taza said.

“For what purpose?” he asked. Tarak couldn’t believe that. He couldn’t forget the odd feeling that had washed over him minutes before he saw the bandits. If he hadn’t looked up, they would have ridden just below the action, and they would have been none the wiser.

And Tillie would be dead, he thought. He didn't like the sickness that took hold in his stomach at the thought.

"To help her," Taza said.

Tarak snorted. "I don't think the ancestors are looking out for the well-being of this woman."

"You speak for the ancestors now?" Taza asked.

Tarak said nothing. He grabbed a stick from the ground and began making small circles in the dirt as he considered his brother's words. He was starting to understand why Taza was determined to help Tillie. He believed that doing so was the will of the ancestors, and Taza wouldn't go against the ancestors. He never would.

“Did you know that her father owns a ranch outside of Tubac?” he asked. He had seen Tillie and Taza speaking before they took off from the valley, but Tarak had been gathering the rest of their supplies and hadn’t been able to hear their discussion.

“I do,” Taza said. “She told me. She also told me that she’s not sure how her father will feel about our presence in the town. She’s never heard him speak against the Apache, but she said that he’s a traditional man.”

Tarak shook his head. “Traditional? What does that even mean? Traditionally Tubac belonged to our people.”

“And it could still belong to us again,” Taza said.

Tarak raised a brow. He looked around, making sure that he wasn't being heard before he leaned in closer to ask his brother his next question. "Do you plan to take the land?" he asked. Taza was a good chief. He was fair and just, but he also wasn't soft-hearted. He was just as much of a warrior as Tarak.

Is he using Tillie as a way to distract her people? Gain their trust before he undercuts them?

"I don't think we will get very far using the mistakes of our father and uncle," Taza said. "I also don't think that we can continue to survive without gaining the white man's trust."

"You want to make peace with them?" Tarak asks, shocked. His brother was willing to use the white men when he needed to, but he'd never made the suggestion that the tribe should be making peace.

“There’s no other way,” Taza said, his voice a whisper. “More and more men come every year. They want gold and land, and we know what happens to us when they think we are the enemy.”

“And they should know what happens to them when we see them as the enemy,” Tarak said, his voice tight. He didn’t want peace. He didn’t believe that they would benefit from it. They never had before, and he didn’t see why this would be any different.

“Perhaps, someone like Tillie might be able to help us with that,” Taza said. There was hope in his voice that shocked Tarak. He never thought that his brother would be such an idealist.

“You know they don’t think much of their

women," Tarak reminded his brother. "I doubt they would care much about what she has to say."

Taza shrugged. "Maybe not her, but her father. I feel that he might be appreciative when we deliver his daughter and his gold back to him."

Tarak thought that his brother had been hit in the head one too many times, but he said nothing. He could tell from the look on his brother's face that there was nothing that Tarak could say that would make him see the insanity of his plan.

"I'm going to go check to see if the hunters have returned," Tarak said.

When they settled for camp, several of the men went to hunt for their dinner. Dusk was

the best time to find game, and the Apache were strong hunters.

Tarak didn't need to check on the hunters. He was sure that they would be successful. But he needed a break from his brother. He was sure that if he didn't get away from him, he would do something that he would soon regret.

"How was the hunt?" Tarak asked as he came upon a group of men roasting meat on large sticks. The smell of the fat sizzling reminded him that he hadn't eaten since his dawn meal. His stomach grumbled.

"There's more than enough food for all of us," one of the men said.

"We killed two buffalos who had separated themselves from the herd," another one said. He was a young boy—this was likely his first

time out—and it was clear that he was immensely proud. “I killed one with a slingshot,” he said.

Tarak nodded. The boy reminded him of himself when he was younger. He’d been eager to prove himself different from his brother, and to show others that he was worthy of their respect, not because of his father and brother, but because of his own attributes.

“Can I have one of those?” Tarak asked, gesturing towards the stick of meat that was currently on the fire. It was smaller than the others, and the meat was starting to burn from being across the fire for too long. Tarak suspected that it was one of the last bits of meat that was going to be cooked tonight.

“We have better meat!” the boy said. He eagerly gestured to the large stack of food that had been prepared.

“It’s fine,” Tarak said. He grabbed the stick, careful not to let the fat slide from the meat and onto his hand.

He leaned down to talk to one of the men. “Make sure that everyone eats soon,” he said. “We have an early day tomorrow. There won’t be time for breakfast.” The man nodded. They were nearly a day behind, and they needed to make up the time.

Tarak grabbed several pieces of the meat and popped them into his mouth. The flavor of the meat exploded on his tongue, and it was so delicious that he didn’t mind the slightly charred taste from the fire.

Tarak grabbed a thick blanket that had been discarded and made his way towards the young woman who was lying several feet

away. He noticed that she was shivering.

“Here,” he said, dropping the thick blanket at her feet.

Tillie had been pretending to be asleep. Her eyes had been closed, but he’d noticed, even from far away, that her breathing wasn’t even, and the nerves on her face twitched every few moments. Plus, he suspected from her shivering that she was cold in the night air.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“A blanket,” he told her plainly. “I know that you see us as heathens, but we do like to keep warm.”

She didn’t say much as she reached out and

wrapped the fabric around her. The blanket had been made for a large man, and it engulfed her so completely that he could just see her head sticking up from inside of it.

She was sitting cross-legged on the pallet, and so he took a seat next to her. He enjoyed the way that her eyes widened at the gesture.

“Here,” he said once more. He handed her half the meat, which was still on the stick.

He expected her to turn her nose up at the food, but she didn’t. She took it and slid a piece of meat off before popping it into her mouth. She didn’t hesitate to eat the food, and she hadn’t worried that they were trying to poison her. He wondered if she was naïve or just stupid for being so trusting.

For several minutes, the two of them sat in

silence. Tillie ate her food, and Tarak stared into the fire. He could hardly feel the warmth from it.

“Thank you,” Tillie said. Her voice was soft and hesitant.

Tarak didn’t say anything. He didn’t know why he even cared about this woman, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t stop thinking about how he had lied to her about her friend’s souls. He also couldn’t stop thinking about how his brother was planning to use her to broker peace with her people.

He worried about what Taza might do if things didn’t work out the way that he hoped.

“Move closer to the fire,” he told her before getting up.

“What?” she asked.

“You’ll be warmer if you stay by the fire throughout the night,” he told her.

“I assumed that those spots would be reserved….” she trailed off.

“Just do what I said,” he told her.

Tarak didn’t wait to see if she listened. He was angry with himself. He was angry with his brother, and he was exhausted.

As he walked back to take his place next to his brother, he told himself that he was only helping Tillie because he wanted to be able to

keep an eye on her.

Chapter 7

The next morning, Tillie woke to the hustle and bustle of men gathering their things. She blinked several times as her mind tried to process what was happening. It was still mostly dark, with the sky just starting to lighten, but everyone but Tillie seemed to be ready to get on with their day.

Groaning, Tillie pressed herself off of her pallet. Her back and shoulders were aching from the hard ground, and her leg muscles felt like reeds shaking in the wind. Tillie grew up on a ranch and had been riding since she could walk. But she wasn't used to riding so hard for so many miles, and her body was beginning to feel it.

Tillie wasn't going to complain. She knew that her presence was a thorn in the side of many

of the men, and she was determined not to draw any more attention to herself than necessary.

Yesterday, she had taken an offered pallet and laid herself as far away from the fire as possible. She had been starving but didn't want to ask anyone to spare any food. Tillie wasn't a complete fool. She knew that the men weren't all friendly towards her. They might have agreed to take her home, but she didn't think that meant that they wanted to give up their food for her.

Once more, Tarak had shown her kindness that had confused her. One moment he was disparaging her, and the next, he was taking care of her. She'd only been near him for a day, but he already made her head spin.

"Tillie?" Chief Taza stood before her, and Tillie immediately stumbled to her feet. Her legs were stiff, and she tried not to groan.

“Good morning,” she said. Tillie was still unsure how she should engage with the chief. Tillie had never met an Apache before, and she certainly had never met a chief. Taza had been nothing but kind to her, but she worried that if she made one wrong misstep in her treatment of him than she would be left behind.

“Walk with me,” he said.

Tillie looked over at her small camp. She didn’t want to deny the chief, but she worried about leaving the few things that she had out in the open.

“One of the boys will saddle your horse,” he told her. Tillie was used to being taken care of. She’d always had maids to dress her and cooks to make her food, but she did not think

that such things would be happening on the road.

“Thank you,” she said. Walking through the camp, Tillie felt a bit of nervousness in her stomach as she walked with Taza.

“How was your evening?” he asked. “Did you get enough to eat?”

“I did,” she said. “It was kind of you to send Tarak to give me a few supplies.” Tillie assumed that Taza had told Tarak to give her food and a blanket. It was the only thing that made sense. Tillie might not know the Apache, but she assumed that when the chief said something, everyone had to follow.

Taza looked at her sheepishly. “I must admit that I thought you had fallen asleep.”

Tillie was surprised to hear that Tarak had done something kind for her of his own volition. It made her even more confused. He made it clear that he did not think that she should be traveling with them, but he had provided her food and comfort.

He'd also suggested that she move closer to the fire, which had been a blessing. Tillie might not have complained, but she had been freezing before the blanket and the fire. Even with the blanket, she wasn't sure that she would have been comfortable enough to sleep.

"I was hoping to learn more about your father," Taza said, getting right to the reason that he had asked Tillie to join him for a quick walk.

"My father?" she asked. She was surprised by the question. She had told Taza that she was

from Tubac, and he'd been excited. Apparently, her father's ranch wasn't too far from where the rest of the tribe was located. Tillie had assumed that he was glad that he wouldn't have to take his tribe out of the way. "Why?" she asked.

"I'm interested in learning more about your family," he told her. "I don't know how much you know about Tubac, but the land the town is built on once belonged to my people."

Suddenly, Tarak's anger at her home made sense. Tillie didn't know a great deal about the history of Tubac, but she knew that if it had once belonged to the Apache, then the history of the town was likely bloody.

"I didn't know that," Tillie said. "I don't know how much you know about my people, but as a daughter, I was kept at home. I didn't go into town very often, and my father didn't have any native employees."

It felt odd to say, but Tillie thought that it was best to speak the truth.

“May I ask you a question?” she asked.

Taza looked surprised, but he nodded.

“Why are you so interested in Tubac?” she asked. She felt that he was more interested in the town than her father, and she wanted to know why. Tubac was a town that was a gateway to many places. It was a city of nomads, at least, that was one of the complaints that her father often had. He said that it made it so difficult to keep good help around.

“Tubac once belonged to the Apache tribe,” he

said.

“Do you wish to take it back?” Tillie asked. She felt her mouth drying at the thought. She had seen first-hand the fierceness of the Apache warriors, and she did not wish to bring that type of danger to the people of her town.

For a moment, she thought about what would happen to James’ wife and children or Henry’s mother if a raid was to come to Tubac.

Taza reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. It stopped her in her tracks. “I do not wish harm on your people,” he told her. His dark eyes were deep, and as Tillie looked into them, she felt the sincerity in them.

“Then, what is it that you want?” she asked. “Why are you helping me?” Tillie knew enough about the world to know that people,

even an Apache chief, did not do things like this out of the kindness of their hearts."

Taza released a heavy sigh and ran a hand through his dark hair. "The Apache tribe is proud," he said, "but we are struggling."

The truth he was speaking to her, the vulnerability of it, made Tillie trust him even further. She didn't think that he would tell her something that made his tribe seem less than fierce if he was going to be lying to her.

"In what way?" she asked. She wanted to learn more. She thought that it might help her to understand why some of the men would look at her with distrustful eyes.

"Food is becoming more and more scarce," he said. "Illness is running rampant through the camps. We need to find a way to co-exist," he

told her.

“Do you think that my people want that?” she asked.

“Do you?” he asked.

Tillie hated that she wasn’t sure. She hadn’t heard too much about the Apache. People would speak about the tribes in church. They would talk about the natives being heathens, which Tillie was starting to think was ridiculous, but the people in her social circle didn’t talk about the Apache often.

“I don’t know,” Tillie told him honestly. “Men don’t talk about those things around women.”

Taza looked disappointed, but he shook his

head in understanding. Tillie felt sorry that she couldn't give him more, but she simply didn't know.

"I'm sorry," she said to him. "My father had never said anything to me about the politics of the town or his business. I was taught to be a good daughter and a wife. It's why I would probably have died if you left me in the valley."

Taza gave her a small laugh. She was glad that he wasn't angry at her. In truth, Tillie was a little bit angry at herself. She wished that she would have paid more attention to things that weren't embroidery and how to tell the maids how to run things around the house.

"I think that you aren't giving yourself enough credit," he told her. "I heard that you were fierce against the bandits."

Tillie smiled. She liked Taza. He wasn't at all what she would have thought an Apache chief would be like.

"I meant what I promised," Tillie told him. "If there is something that I can do to help your people, I will do it."

Tillie had only been in the presence of the Apache for a day, but she meant what she said when she told Taza that she would try and convince her father to help the Apache.

"Thank you," Taza told her.

As Tillie and Taza walked back around towards the horses, she couldn't stop the question that rolled off of her tongue. "Do your men know about your concerns?" she asked him. She wondered if the other Apache

knew that their chief was planning to try and broker peace with the men who had stolen their land. She couldn't imagine that they did. Almost all of the men viewed her with veiled distrust, and she was a woman reliant on them and one who had absolutely no power. She couldn't imagine that they would be happy to talk to someone like her father.

Taza stopped and looked at her. "There are some who want the same thing that I do," he told her diplomatically.

"And the rest of them?"

Tillie didn't miss how Taza hadn't answered her question directly. There might be men that saw the need for peace, but she wondered if they knew about why Taza wished to help her.

"Some are fearful of your people. Their

fathers, uncles, and friends have been killed by their weapons and diseases."

The thought of such violence hurt Tillie's heart. She didn't like the idea of anyone dying. When she thought about death now, she saw James and Henry. Tillie hoped that she never saw another dead body in her entire life, and if she did, she prayed that it was someone who didn't experience such terrible violence.

"And those men?" she asked.

It was clear to Tillie that Taza was skirting around her questions. She wanted to assume it was because he worried that she wouldn't help them, but she suspected it was because some of these men, men who hated her people, were stationed at their camp.

"Those men will do what their chief

commands," he said. "Just like they are now."

The confirmation of danger stole her breath from her body.

"We should get you on your horse," Taza said, steering the subject towards more neutral topics. "We have a lot of miles to catch up on today."

Tillie didn't say much. As she followed Taza, she couldn't help but wonder which of his men caused her harm. Last night, she had slept amongst them. She had taken food from Tarak without a second thought. Though she knew that some of the men disliked her, she hadn't considered that they might want to kill her in retaliation for all of her perceived slights.

The hairs on the back of Tillie's neck stood at attention, and for the first time, she wondered

if traveling with the Apache had been her best chance of survival after all.

Chapter 8

The spring sun beat down on Tarak's back with a fierceness he hadn't expected for April. It felt like another warning that they were on the wrong path.

So far, it was the only sign. They'd been traveling for the better part of the day, not stopping for more than a few moments here and there, in order to make up the ground that they had missed the day before.

Taza was determined to return Tillie home as soon as possible. Tarak suspected that part of that was to try and entice her father to help build inroads with the white men in the town. Taza shivered at the thought. He hadn't spoken about his brother's plans, but the thought of them had kept him up for the better part of the night. When he wasn't

thinking about his brother, he was wondering about Tillie.

“The heat is punishment,” Chalipun grumbled as he rode his horse closer to Tarak. All day, Chalipun had ridden beside him telling him new omens about the destruction that Tillie would bring. Even Tarak, who agreed that Tillie and her people were an enormous problem for their tribe, had a hard time taking Chalipun’s words too seriously. He appeared to be seeing danger at every turn.

“Punishment for what?” Tarak asked. He didn’t know why he did so. He suspected that Chalipun’s answer had something to do with Tillie.

“You know what for,” he said.

Tarak didn’t respond. The oppressive heat was

starting to affect everyone. Though they were used to it, it didn't make for pleasant travel. Up until today, the roads had been clear and the spring air pleasant. Tarak had enjoyed the journey. At least he had until yesterday.

"It's the desert," Tarak reminded his cousin. "It's always this hot."

Chalipun grunted. "This is a warning from the ancestors," he said, his tone grave.

Tarak hated that some part of him agreed. The air was too oppressive to be anything but a warning, but that wasn't an opinion he would voice aloud. Tarak wasn't as prone to seeing the ancestors as Chalipun had always been, and people would find it odd if he was suddenly seeing omens. They would question it, and then, Tarak was worried that he would have to explain the real reason the ancestors would be warning them—his brother's ridiculous plan.

“You should be more mindful of how you speak,” Tarak said. His voice was low as he spoke to Chalipun. “Taza isn’t pleased with the defiance you showed yesterday. Most of the men agree with him….”

“Some don’t,” Chalipun interjected. “Some want her gone, and they don’t agree with what your brother has done.”

Tarak said nothing. He didn’t wish to be seen as siding with Chalipun. He felt as though he’d made his opinion known when he was asked, and now, he needed to support his chief. Chalipun’s open defiance made him uneasy.

“Be careful, cousin,” Tarak said. “There may not be as many men ready to defy their chief as you believe.”

Tarak said nothing further as he rode slightly ahead and towards his brother. “It’s a warm day,” he said by way of greeting, when he was finally close enough for Taza to hear him.

“Don’t you start,” Taza snapped, surprising him. Taza was usually good-natured and calm.

“What’s wrong?” Tarak asked. He assumed that it had something to do with the conversation that his brother had had with Tillie before they had ridden off for the day. The entire camp had been speaking about it.

Taza had had one of the younger boys pack her horse while he took her for a stroll around the camp. Tarak had watched them as they walked, eager to know what they could possibly be talking about. He hadn’t had a chance to ask, nor did he have the opportunity to scold his brother for showing obvious

favoritism towards their barely tolerated guest.

“Chalipun has been muttering in my ear all afternoon. He’s has a portent of doom at every turn. He even told me that a cactus plant that my horse trampled on was a sign of the ancestors that trouble was underfoot.”

Tarak couldn’t help but laugh slightly at his brother’s words. He hadn’t realized that Chalipun was being so ridiculous. Tarak shook his head as he considered his cousin’s words and actions. It made him feel silly for having some similar thoughts.

“Chalipun is on edge,” Tarak said. He didn’t care to see his brother and his cousin fighting with one another. It wouldn’t do the tribe any good for them to be divided, especially over something that Tarak didn’t think would come to pass.

“He has no reason to be,” Taza said. “Tillie hasn’t even spoken to him.”

“She hasn’t spoken to anyone but you,” Tarak reminded him.

“If you have something to say, feel free to speak it aloud,” Taza said.

Tarak looked around slightly. The problem with trying to talk while riding was that you couldn’t know how your conversation was going to carry, and Tarak wasn’t interested in the rest of the men overhearing him.

Tarak was mindful not to outwardly oppose his brother. It had been drilled into him since he was a boy that his role was to support his brother in his job as chief. He was to fight by

his side, possibly die by it as well, and he was meant to support him even when he disagreed.

“The men are beginning to wonder why you are so concerned about this woman,” Tarak said. His voice was low as he spoke.

“What?” Taza asked. It was obvious that Taza had no idea what his focus on his mission was doing to the tribe.

“The men are wondering if you are interested in Tillie in some sort of romantic way,” Tarak said.

Taza’s face was almost comical, and Tarak would have laughed if the circumstances had been any different.

“That’s ridiculous,” Taza said.

“You wouldn’t be the first man felled by a woman like her,” Tarak said. Tarak personally didn’t understand it. When he looked at Tillie, he could admit that she was pretty. Her features were delicate like those of a toy doll, but he could never be with a woman who would not raise his sons to be great Apache warriors.

Taza gave him an incredulous look. “That’s not what I’m doing, and you know it,” Taza said. It was clear from the tone of his voice that he didn’t find this all as amusing as Tarak did.

“I know that,” Tarak reminded him. “The rest of the men don’t. They don’t understand why you are so determined to not only get this woman home but also to see to her comfort.”

At his words, Taza released a snort of laughter. “I’m not the one seeing her to her comfort,” Taza said. “From what I heard from her this morning, you gave her food and a blanket. I honestly hadn’t spent too much time thinking about what she needed.”

Tarak said nothing. He hadn’t spent too much time thinking about why he felt the need to help Tillie last night.

“Just because I don’t think your plan is sound doesn’t mean that I want the woman to starve or freeze to death,” Tarak said. “It’s probably better that I take care of her instead of you.”

Taza said nothing, but Tarak assumed from his silence that his brother was in agreement. “We should take a break,” Tarak said, changing the subject away from Tillie. He was still curious to know what she and his brother had talked about, but he suspected that he wasn’t going

to get too much from him right now.

“We still need to cover ground before we make camp,” Taza said.

“We have time to take a small break. The young ones need time off their horses if you hope for them to ride tomorrow.”

Tarak knew that his brother was eager for them to get to Arizona for many reasons, but Tarak suspected that he knew what Tarak was saying was true. While a majority of them were used to doing long, hard rides, there were young boys who were on their first party away from home.

“Fine,” Taza said.

Tarak placed his fingers in his mouth and released a low whistle, his signal to the men that they were stopping. He was almost sure that he heard an audible groan from even the most seasoned of riders.

Tarak jumped off of his horse. Though he could have continued riding for hours, he was glad to take a break. He grabbed his waterskin from his belt and took a big, long gulp. The liquid was cool against his parched throat, and he stopped himself from gulping too much of it down.

“I’m going to go and check on the boys,” he told Taza.

Tarak walked towards the back of their pack, where several of the boys were stretching out their legs. Some of them were even running around between the horses. They stopped as they saw Tarak.

Many of them straightened up as he came into view, and he hid a smile as he watched them. He recalled how he, Chalipun, and Taza would do the same thing when their father and uncle would inspect them.

Tarak wasn't only interested in taking a break to give the young boys time to stretch, but also, so that he could check in on Tillie. Again, he seemed to be the only one who actually thought about the fact that the woman wasn't used to their ways.

He was impressed that she could even ride.

As he walked towards her, he was surprised to see that she had been able to get off her horse. He'd expected her to be so stiff that he would need to offer assistance.

“Tarak,” she said. Her voice was soft, and she bowed her head slightly in his direction. He examined her slightly. Her face, which had once been the color of fresh milk, was now splotched with red. Her blue eyes looked bright and alert. Sweat had pulled small pieces of her hair away from her face. The curls spiraled towards her cheeks as if they were vines and she was the sun.

Once more, he couldn’t deny that she was a beautiful woman.

“Here,” he told her curtly. He thrust his waterskin into her chest. “Drink,” he ordered her.

Her eyes widened, but she took the skin without argument. For a moment, Tarak wondered if she would drink from the same skin as him or if she would balk at the idea of such a thing.

But she didn't even look twice at the skin as she brought it to her lips. She gulped the water down so quickly that Tarak was worried that she would vomit it all up.

"Easy," he said to her.

"Sorry," Tillie said. She handed the waterskin back to him, and once more, Tarak felt bad as he caught sight of her. She was still dressed in her bloody dress, and it was clear that she was not used to spending so much time in the sun.

He sighed slightly, once more frustrated at his brother. He was glad to use Tillie to try and get something from her people, but he expected Tarak to keep her alive in the meantime.

“I’ll see if one of the men has an extra waterskin,” he told her. He hadn’t thought that she hadn’t packed one when she gathered her things. He rolled his eyes slightly at the thought.

Of course, she wouldn’t have packed anything that would actually be of use, he thought as he looked at her.

“I don’t want to put anyone out,” she told him.

Tarak said nothing. “I’ll take care of it,” he told her. “Can’t have you dying before we get to Arizona,” he snarked.

Taza didn’t wait around to see how she reacted as he walked back to his horse. It didn’t matter. He would make sure that Tillie stayed alive, but he wasn’t going to promise to

be happy about it.

Chapter 9

Tillie couldn't remember the last time that she had been in so much pain. Her arms were shaking from holding onto the reins. Her legs hurt so badly that she was sure she would start crying if she had to get back onto a horse, and the skin on her face was badly burned.

When they had finally stopped for the night, she nearly cried with relief. The entire day had been a brutal affair. It was made all the more terrible because she was left alone. Until Tarak had stopped to give her water from a skin, not a single soul had spoken to her. She was behind the men with the younger boys, and while they had looked at her with odd, curious eyes, but they had been quiet.

Luckily, they had also been kind. Two of them had helped her dismount her horse, to her

immense appreciation. She hadn't thought that she would have been able to do it herself. They had ridden from before sunup until the sun had fallen well below the horizon.

It was a grueling pace, and Tillie could see it was even taking its toll on the young boys. One had nearly fallen off his horse when his exhaustion nearly hit.

Now, they were all gathered around finding a place to sleep. Tonight, Tillie had no desire to be near the fire. Her skin was past the point of being warm from being in the sun all day, and she was sure that if she had a mirror handy, she would be horrified. As it were, she wouldn't have cared had the pain not been excruciating.

Tillie hissed as she pressed two wet fingers to her cheek. She was surprised when the water didn't sizzle off of her skin. She was also grateful that one of the boys had given her a

water skin of her own.

Her head had been aching this afternoon from the lack of water, and she had nearly sobbed in relief when Tarak had given her a drink.

Tillie was proud of herself, though. She had been more miserable than she could ever remember being in her entire life, but she hadn't complained. Not once. Because at the end of the day, Tillie needed the Apache to get her home. It wouldn't do to complain about the difficulty of their travels, especially when Tillie knew that many of the men didn't want her to be traveling with them anyway.

Sighing, Tillie decided that there was nothing that she could do about her skin tonight. She prayed that because it was already burnt, that it wouldn't get even worse tomorrow. As it was, she had a limited supply of water, and she wasn't going to waste it trying to soothe herself.

“There is some aloe over that way,” a small voice said.

Tillie was so shocked that someone might be talking to her that she nearly dropped her water skin.

“Excuse me?” she asked.

She looked next to her and saw a small boy sitting several feet away. He was reed-thin and couldn’t have been more than fifteen. His hair was jet black and came to the middle of his back. Tillie wondered how he kept his locks so nice in all of the heat and dirt.

“There’s an aloe plant that way,” he said, pointing towards a rock overlay that was

several yards away from the camp.

“What’s aloe?” she asked. Tillie was too tired and in too much pain to try and pretend like she knew what the boy was talking about.

The boy laughed. The sound of it was sweet, and for a moment, the sound of it reminded her of the children who would run around her father’s ranch.

“It’s a plant,” he said. “You can rub the inside of it on your skin. It’ll help with the burn.”

Tillie smiled. “Is it that bad?” she asked. She didn’t need to give the boy any context about what she was talking about. Even in the darkness, Tillie was sure that her face was as red as a wild rose.

The boy shrugged slightly. “My brother’s wife is fair,” he said. “When she first came to live with us, my mother would rub it on her shoulders after she was in the sun.”

Tillie was surprised by his personal story. No one had spoken to her outside of Tarak and Taza, and while both of the men had been kind to her in their own way, they hadn’t made a real effort to engage her. Tillie still didn’t know anything about either of the men really.

“What is your name?” Tillie asked.

The boy looked around the camp with wide eyes. It was almost as if he was worried about someone catching the two of them being too familiar with one another. The thought made Tillie sad. She didn’t view the Apache as her enemy, and she couldn’t understand why they couldn’t see her as Tillie instead of an evil

colonizer.

Tillie sighed and turned her attention back towards the fire. It was so high that Tillie could still feel the warmth of it even though she was nowhere near it.

“I’m Elan,” the boy said finally. His voice was soft, but as Tillie looked over at him, she could see the defiant lift in his chin.

She smiled at herself. “It’s nice to meet you, Elan,” she said. “I’m Tillie.” She would have stuck her hand out for him to shake, but she wasn’t sure if handshakes were customary for the Apache. Plus, she could tell that the boy was a bit nervous just speaking to her.

“I know who you are,” he told her. “Everyone has been talking about you.”

She snorted slightly. She wasn't surprised that she had been the topic of conversation for the past few days.

"Oh yeah?" she asked. She wasn't going to press. Tillie didn't much care what the men were saying about her. Their chief had promised to get her home, and Tillie was sure that he would. After all, he was hoping that by getting her home, her father would help him.

"Some of the men think you have been sent to destroy us," Elan told her.

Tillie rolled her eyes. She had not given any of the men reason to distrust her, but it seemed that while they complained about how her people have treated them, they were fine judging her harshly.

“I don’t think that, though,” Elan whispered. His words took Tillie aback.

“You don’t?” she asked.

Elan shook his head. The action sent his long hair flying, and it made him appear slightly younger than he already was.

“You did better on your horse than I did,” he told her, a cheeky grin on his face. “So, maybe you are part Apache.”

Tillie couldn’t help the loud laughter that erupted from her. She liked Elan, she decided. She didn’t have any siblings, but if she had, she would have liked to have one like the young boy sitting next to her.

“You should really get some of that aloe soon. It’ll hurt worse in the morning if you don’t,” he told her.

Tillie winced as she pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose. “I don’t think it’s possible for this to get worse,” she said. But Tillie wasn’t going to pass up a possible cure either way, so with a groan, she got up from her sleeping pallet.

“Watch my things, will you?” she asked Elan.

“No one is going to take it,” he told her. “They’d be worried you’d bring bad luck down on them.”

Tillie tried not to roll her eyes again as she walked around the camp towards the stone outcropping. Thinking about it, she couldn’t

stop herself from wondering why Elan was sitting by her instead of with his friends.

Looking at his size in relation to the other boys, she thought that he might be a bit of an outcast, which made her like him even more.

“Should have brought him with me,” Tillie grumbled as she fumbled around in the dark. She was realizing that she didn’t actually know what aloe looked like, and being able to barely see made things even more difficult.

“What are you doing?” a deep voice asked.

Tillie released a small, startled noise which was somewhere between a scream and a groan. She pressed a hand to her chest in an attempt to try and calm her racing heart. She squinted slightly, making out a tall, male figure in the dark.

“Tarak?” Tillie asked. “What are you doing in the dark? You nearly stopped my heart.” Tillie wasn’t sure if he would find her dying of fright to be a good or a bad thing. She wasn’t too keen to find out.

“Why are you away from the camp?” Tarak asked her. He had walked towards her, and he was close enough now that Tillie could make out the anger on his face.

“I didn’t know that I wasn’t allowed to take a walk,” she said. She placed her hands on her hips and gave him her most defiant look.

Tarak looked at her through narrow eyes, which immediately made Tillie want to back down and apologize. Though Tarak wasn’t chief, there was something about him that radiated power and danger. Something told

Tillie that she would be silly to cross him.

“It’s dangerous to be away from the camp,” he told her.

“You aren’t with the camp,” she told him. “Why is that anyway?”

Tillie was surprised that Tarak was away from the camp. She was starting to notice that unlike Taza, who always seemed surrounded by men, Tarak was much more of a loner. He rode quietly and mostly kept to himself.

“There are wild animals out here. Coyotes and bears.”

Tillie rolled her eyes at Tarak’s obvious attempts to try and scare her. “The camp is so

close that the firelight is still visible," she said. "If I'm not safe here, I don't think I'm much safer there."

Tarak didn't like her answer. "You are clearly full of your own hubris," he said. "I shouldn't be surprised. That tends to be the way of your people."

Tillie had had enough. She had tried her best to be cordial to him. After all, he had brought her a blanket, food, and water. But she was also exhausted by the way in which he looked down at her and blamed her for things that she had never done.

"Maybe you should actually get to know me before you blame me for all the things that *my people* have done to wrong you," she snapped. "Because I've done nothing but thank the Apache since you saved my life."

From the widening of his eyes, it was clear that Tarak hadn't expected her to speak back to him. *Good,* she thought, taking satisfaction in his surprise. Tillie had never been the type to hold her tongue, and she didn't see the point in starting now.

Tarak said nothing, but his dark eyes continued looking at her as if she was a puzzle that he was trying to solve.

"I came here to get some aloe," she told him, finally breaking the silence.

"What?" Tarak asked.

Tillie wasn't sure if she should tell Tarak about Elan, so instead she said, "For my face. I need aloe."

“You know about plants?” Tarak asked, surprised.

Tillie knew nothing about plants, but she wasn’t going to tell Tarak that.

“I told you that you shouldn’t judge me so quickly,” she told him smugly.

Tarak said nothing. He simply moved away slightly, allowing Tillie to pass by him. It was too bad that Tillie had no idea what she was looking for. She could feel Tarak’s eyes on hers as she tried to find the plant that would soothe her skin.

Tillie saw a small, purple plant, which she grabbed. She had no idea if this was the plant that would help her, but she was tired of the

feeling of Tarak's eyes on her.

"Tillie," he called out as she turned to walk back to the camp.

She closed her eyes, imagining what he could have to say to her. "What?" she asked.

"That's not aloe."

Tillie groaned as Tarak laughed. She knew that she looked sillier than she had before, and if she hadn't been so desperate for the aloe, she would have continued walking.

As it were, she was finding herself relying on Tarak once more, and she hated it.

Chapter 10

Tarak had followed shortly behind Tillie as she walked back to the campsite. He tried not to smile as he watched her huff around angrily. She hadn't appreciated his corrections, but she had listened as he had explained to her the difference between aloe and cactus fruit.

He could tell from the sour look on her face that she wanted nothing more than to storm away from him, but he had seen the redness on her skin from earlier, and he suspected that the pain of it kept her from leaving.

As he watched her sit back on her pallet, he was surprised to see one of the young boys, Elan, talking to her. He showed her how to get the inside of the aloe plant, and Tarak suspected that he was explaining its properties.

He was shocked to see one of the men, or rather boys, speaking to her. He hadn't thought that anyone but himself and his brother were willing to talk to her. He sighed as he watched her hand a cactus fruit to Elan.

He wasn't surprised that Elan would be the one to befriend her. His brother's wife was only half Apache, and so, out of all the men, he would be most likely to not see her for her differences.

"She shouldn't be allowed near the young ones," Chalipun said.

Tarak bit his lip to keep himself from groaning at his cousin's presence.

“It’s fine,” Tarak said. “I’ve seen Elan with a slingshot. I suspect that Tillie is in more danger from him than he is from her.”

Tarak didn’t think that Tillie meant any of them harm, but he knew what could happen when her people felt threatened, and he was much more worried about how things would go when they took her home than he was about her talking to one of the young boys.

“What were you two speaking about?” Chalipun asked.

Tarak quirked an eyebrow at Chalipun. “Were you spying on me?” he asked. He kept his tone light, but he was genuinely concerned that his cousin had been following him. What was even more concerning was that he had not seen or heard it. Tarak was a warrior with heightened senses. Chalipun being able to sneak up on him would not do.

“I was following her,” he said. “Someone has to make sure that she’s not doing anything she shouldn’t be.”

The anger in Chalipun’s voice made Tarak uneasy. He knew that his cousin wasn’t happy that Tillie had joined them, which was an understatement, but Tarak didn’t understand why he was so determined to believe that she could harm them in some way.

“You are too paranoid,” Tarak said. “Tillie can barely lift her arms after all the riding we did today. She is likely too exhausted to hatch some nefarious plan.”

Tillie’s words were playing in Tarak’s mind. She had railed at him for judging her for the evils of her people because her people had judged his. It was a difficult idea to reckon with. Tarak didn’t trust Tillie. There was

something about her that didn't sit right with him, but he couldn't ignore the fact that she didn't really represent a threat to them.

"I thought you were one of the few who could see reason," Chalipun said.

Tarak rolled his eyes at his cousin. "I do see reason," he said. "I know that her people are dangerous, but I also know that she's not." Tarak looked over at where she was laughing with Elan. Several of the young boys were looking at her with wide eyes inching closer and closer. Tarak suspected that Elan was going to be more popular tomorrow than he had been this morning. He chuckled at the thought.

"You are being naïve like your brother," Chalipun said. There was venom in his voice, which once more drew Tarak up short. "And it's going to get us all killed," he snapped.

Before Tarak could say anything more, Chalipun got up from his seat and walked towards several of the other men. Tarak watched him go feeling more and more uneasy. Taza didn't see Chalipun as a threat. Their cousin was known for being prone to superstitions, especially after the death of his father.

But something told Tarak that he needed to keep a close eye on Chalipun. His cousin could prove to be much more dangerous than Tillie could ever hope to be.

Tarak sighed. His stomach was full of leftover meat and the heat of the fire was starting to make his eyes heavy. He leaned back on his pallet. The worries of the day weighed heavily upon him, but the hard riding won out, and before Tarak could think too much more about Tillie or Chalipun, his eyes were closed, and he was fast asleep.

The stress of the journey was beginning to weigh on Tarak. He was used to hard campaigns where they would ride for miles after engaging in conflict with the white men or another tribe, but these long, languishing days in the hot sun were starting to wear on him.

Today, Tarak decided that it was best if he rode at the back of the group. He told his brother that he was doing it to ensure the safety of the younger men. They were riding deeper and deeper into the desert, and Tarak wanted to make certain that nothing befell the young men.

At least, that was what he said. Truthfully, he wanted a chance to observe Tillie. After last night's brief confrontation, he found himself

watching her more closely. He was also worried about Chalipun. His cousin was stalking the girl as if he were a snake, and she was a mouse. Tarak didn't think he would strike, but he wouldn't put anything past him.

Today was different than the previous day. Elan was practically attached to Tillie's side, and his comfort with her had given the other boys the courage to speak with her as well.

"Tell me about the pig on your father's farm," Elan said. There was childish glee in his voice, and Tarak couldn't help but smile.

"You mean the hog?" she asked. Her voice was light as a small smile graced her lips. Tarak noticed her wince. The aloe had helped her face, but the sun was bright once more, and he knew that she was experiencing pain from her burned skin.

“How big was the hog?” one boy asked.

“What was its name?” another shouted.
“Did it eat anyone?”

Tarak shook his head at their questions. He couldn’t understand why any of the boys cared so much about the hog. He suspected that whatever the story of it was it must have been pretty good considering the eager way that Elan leaned forward on his horse.

Before Tarak could catch a word of the story, he felt the small hairs on the back of his neck beginning to stand at attention. It was a similar feeling to what he felt when he had come across Tillie’s stagecoach being set upon.

His hand immediately went towards his belt, where he kept his axe, and he prepared to

fight.

“Coyotes!” someone yelled.

Immediately, there was panic. The boys, who so desperately wanted to be men, became immediately frightened as they heard the growl of the coyotes. Tarak didn’t know what to do. If he ordered the boys to scatter, he worried that they would get lost in the vastness of the land, but he worried that they would end up being eaten.

“Stay on your horse!” Tillie yelled. To Tarak’s surprise, she had taken charge of the young men and was herding them slightly towards the center of the group. It was smart. It would put the experienced men around the edges and keep the boys safer.

“How many?” Tarak yelled. His eyes searched

around, and he immediately froze as he saw a small pack of coyotes surrounding them. He kicked himself for not hearing the animals long before they got close enough to surround them. *I'm too distracted,* he thought.

Before anyone could get their bearings or grab an effective weapon, the coyotes charged. They behaved smartly and immediately went for the horses. Tarak cursed under his breath. He didn't want to throw his axe as it is his only available weapon, but he's also not keen to end up horseless or legless.

From the sound of knives sinking into soft flesh, Tarak knew that the men around him were making the same decisions. He groaned as he grabbed the handle of his axe, but before he could take aim, he heard a loud, feminine scream from behind him.

The sound of it immediately drew his attention, and he saw Tillie scream as one of

the coyotes attacked Elan's horse. The boy had an arrow docked, but he was shaking in fear and his horse was neighing loudly as the coyote attached itself to its legs.

Tarak knew that the boy would never be able to get a shot off before he was thrown from his horse.

For the first time in a long time, Tarak didn't know what to do. There was too much panic, and he wasn't confident that he could land his axe smoothly in the coyote's skull without potentially harming someone else.

He maneuvered his horse around, determined to put himself between the animal and the boy, but before he could, he heard a loud whistle, which drew his immediate attention.

"You don't want that boy!" Tillie's high-

pitched voice said. She was charging her horse slightly towards the coyote. “He’s all bone!”

Tarak cursed under his breath as he realized that her plan to draw the coyote’s attention away from Elan was working. It was working almost too well as several of the other coyotes that had not yet been killed turned their attention towards the noise that she was making.

“Come on!” Tillie yelled again. She brought her horse closer. “Come and get me.”

The coyote attacking Elan listened. He immediately lunged towards the new threat, Tillie’s horse, who neighed loudly as the animal’s teeth sank into its leg. Tarak’s heart stopped as he watched Tillie’s horse attempt to shake the other animal off. In doing so, he was making it nearly impossible for Tillie to hang on.

Tarak's heart stopped as he watched her small body fly from her saddle. It was almost as if everything was happening in slow motion as her body landed with a loud thump on the ground. Her head hit the dirt so hard that the earth beneath it moved.

That was concerning enough. Tillie was out cold, and within the sights of the remaining coyote. Without thinking, Tarak released his axe. This time it landed with deadly precision. Tillie had drawn the attention of the remaining coyotes and gave the men time to release arrows felling the remaining coyotes.

Tarak immediately jumped off his horse and rushed towards the fallen woman. Steps behind him was his brother.

"Is she alive?" he asked.

Tarak couldn't tell. He reached out and pressed two fingers to her neck. He waited a moment, concerned that he couldn't immediately find her heartbeat. But then, a small thump was detected under his fingers, and he heard a sharp intake of breath.

"She's alive," Tarak said.

"Thank the ancestors," Taza breathed out.

His words angered Tarak because he knew that his brother was simply glad that he could still use her for his own purposes. Standing there, in the dirt, with his arms wrapped around her, Tarak was starting to wonder if he had indeed been wrong about Tillie.

She had nearly sacrificed her life for a native

boy. She'd done so without a second thought, and it was something that Tarak would never forget.

Chapter 11

Tillie's entire body felt like it was on fire. She didn't know where she was or what had happened to her, but she knew that whatever had happened to her wasn't good. She tried to get up, but she couldn't move her arms, and she immediately began to panic.

"Don't move!" a voice called out.

It took more effort than Tillie could imagine to open her eyes to tiny little slits. She couldn't see much, but she could see dark hair and olive skin. She knew that she was with the Apache men.

She tried to speak, but all that came out of her mouth was a slight croak.

“Give me your waterskin,” the voice said. Tillie’s eyes were still struggling to open fully, but as she came to, she was starting to realize that it was Tarak who was speaking.

“Is she going to live?” a small voice asked.

Tillie suspected that that voice belonged to Elan. She was starting to remember what had occurred.

“Here,” Tarak said. His strong arms propped Tillie up from her prone position, and his other arm lifted the waterskin to her lips. The cool liquid ran over her lips and into her mouth, taking care of her parched throat.

She drank so deeply that she couldn’t stop a

cough from pressing out from her throat. The coughs wracked her body.

“Easy,” Tarak said. He pulled the waterskin away from her lips, and though Tillie was desperate for more, she was also desperate for answers.

“What happened?” she asked. Her voice was soft as she spoke. Though she remembered their party being attacked by coyotes, and remembered Elan’s screams, there were some gaps in her memory.

“You took a bad fall from your horse,” Tarak said.

“I thought you were dead,” Elan told her. His voice was high-pitched, and he sounded younger than usual.

Tillie felt as if she had died and been jammed back into her body. Every single bone ached, and even her tongue felt heavy with fatigue. She had fallen off of plenty of horses when she was a young girl learning to ride, and she had never felt as she did now.

“I feel like I’m dead,” Tillie said. She struggled to sit up on her own. After giving her water, Tarak had laid her back down.

“Don’t try and move,” Tarak said.

“I don’t think I even can,” she responded. Tillie was starting to get more and more strength. Her coughing had subsided, and her voice was starting to come back full force.

“We swaddled you to protect you from getting

a chill," Tarak said. He reached out to her and began unwrapping the tight bindings that had been wrapped around her arms. When he did, she could feel the light, desert breeze playing across her skin.

"Thank you," she said. She didn't know what exactly she was thanking him for. At the very least, it was taking care of her when she was incapacitated.

"Go run and tell Taza that she's awake," Tarak said to Elan. Tillie didn't want the young boy to go. She wanted to make sure that he was unharmed. She remembered seeing the coyote going for his horse. She knew that if he fell off, he was likely to get seriously harmed. It was what caused her to jump into the fray and try and help.

"Is he okay?" Tillie has Tarak as she sat up. She could see from the look in his eyes that he didn't like her sitting up on her own. She

didn’t care, though. He didn’t seem to like her doing much of anything, so she didn’t pay attention to it.

“He’s fine,” Tarak said. “He’s been by your side since we brought you to camp.”

Tillie blinked slightly, trying to clear the rest of the fog from her brain. She looked around, noticing for the first time that it was dark and that they were the only two people around the fire.

“Where is everyone else?” she asked. She tried sitting all the way up, but her bones hurt. She must have hit the ground harder than she thought.

“The men made camp a ways away. We wanted to make sure that you had quiet to rest,” he said.

Tillie was surprised. She couldn't believe that they wanted to take care of her, especially Tarak. He had seen to her basic needs, but she suspected that was because of Taza, and not out of a desire to make her journey with them anymore comfortable.

"That was nice of everyone," she said. She released a heavy groan as she was finally able to sit up straight. Everything felt stiff and bruised as she sat up. She pressed a hand to the back of her head, surprised that it was soaked with blood and sweat.

"You hit the ground pretty hard," he said. "We worried that you might not wake up." His voice was thick with concern, and Tillie couldn't help but wonder if there was more going on than he was letting on.

“Unlucky for you,” she said. “I’m much tougher than I look.” Tillie didn’t think that she was that tough, but she was going to make sure that Tarak thought so.

Tarak said nothing. The fire was playing shadows across his face, highlighting his features. Tillie couldn’t help but be struck by how handsome a man Tarak was when he wasn’t scowling and threatening her. His dark eyes weren’t cold and endless.

Instead, they were warm and reminded her of the rich chocolate her father would treat her to when he came back from a business trip. His jaw was chiseled, and his long hair brushed the bottom of it. This was the first time she had really had a chance to examine his features, and she found them breathtaking.

“Despite what you think,” Tarak said, “I don’t want you dead.”

Tillie said nothing. She knew that Tarak didn't want her dead. If he did, he wouldn't have given her food, water, or bedding. She also suspected that he wouldn't have been sad to see her gone.

"What happened?" she asked once more. She didn't feel like getting into the semantics around if Tarak wanted her dead or not. Her head was pounding, and her stomach was rumbling as it realized it had only had water since this morning's breakfast of jerky.

"What do you remember?" he asked.

"I remember the coyotes. I remember hearing Elan screaming and thinking about how best to get the coyote away from him, so that you men would have a clear shot at it."

“You don’t remember falling off the horse?” he asked.

Tillie shook her head and grimaced. She didn’t. She remembered her horse getting spooked, but she hadn’t worried too much about it. She was a strong rider. She had even helped break a few horses for her father.

“I’m surprised that the coyotes didn’t have a go at me,” she said. She shivered at the thought. When she had seen the coyotes going for Elan, she hadn’t thought twice about jumping into the fray. Tillie wouldn’t classify herself as brave, but she wasn’t going to allow a young boy to be eaten.

“We managed to get them before they got you,” Tarak said.

Tillie nodded slowly. “I supposed that’s another thing that I’m going to have to thank you for,” she said. She was being cheeky, but in truth, she was grateful. She was sure that without the Apache, she would have been dead several times over.

“Why would you do that?” Tarak asked. His voice was heavy and thick with emotion.

Tillie looked at him through narrowed eyes. She felt like he was trying to tell her something, but she wasn’t entirely sure what it was. His face was too blank for her to make out anything. “Do what?” she asked before looking away.

She started picking at a loose thread in the blanket he had placed atop her. She was covered in sweat from being so close to the fire, but the weight of the blanket comforted her.

“Why would you sacrifice yourself for an Apache?”

Tillie immediately stiffened. She knew from the tone of Tarak’s voice that he really did want to know the answer to his question. He was genuinely shocked that she would potentially sacrifice herself for Elan.

“Just because you only see me as one of my people doesn’t mean that I feel the same way. I saw a young boy in trouble, a boy who had shown me kindness, and I did what I could to help him,” she said. There was anger in her voice as she spoke, and it was clear to her that Tarak was surprised by that emotion.

She didn’t know what she expected from Tarak, but what she got was his complete silence. His dark eyes examined her, and Tillie tried her best not to squirm under the weight

of them.

Before either of them could say anything else, the sound of footsteps coming closer broke through their tense silence.

Taza was striding towards them. He was holding a stick full of meat, and Elan was practically running to keep up with him.

“I heard you were awake,” Taza said. His voice was friendly, and Tillie couldn’t help but smile back. Taza had more charisma than his brother, which Tillie suspected helped him as chief.

“I am,” Tillie said.

As Taza came closer, he held out the stick.

Tillie could see fatty meat sizzling on it. She could smell the fat from it burning as it dripped to the ground.

“I thought you might be hungry,” he said. He extended the stick slightly further, but Tillie was still too weak to make a move for it.

“Here,” Tarak said. He took it from his brother. He slid a piece of the meat off and handed it to Tillie. She was too hungry to think too much about what she was eating. The meat was flavorful, and she chewed with appreciation.

She closed her eyes as she swallowed. “That’s one of the coyotes who tried to eat you,” Elan said as Tillie swallowed the meat.

“Really?” she asked. She didn’t know why she was surprised. She couldn’t imagine that the

Apache were going to let so much game go to waste. She was too hungry to care about what she was eating.

“We made sure to save you some,” Taza said. “After all, you are a hero.”

Tillie felt herself blushing at the praise. “I did what anyone would do,” she said. Tarak released a small snort. It was clear that he did not think that many people would do what she did.

“We are grateful for what you’ve done,” he said.

“I’m just happy that I was there to help,” Tillie said. It was the only thing she could think to say.

“This is a kindness that my people won’t forget,” he told her.

Tillie stayed quiet as she ate. She was glad that Elan was safe, and she didn’t need praise. All she wanted was to get home safely.

“You must be tired,” Taza said. “I wanted to make sure that you were okay, but I’ll leave you to be looked after.”

Tillie said nothing as he nodded at her and walked away. She was tired and aching, but she suspected that she wouldn’t be getting a lot of sleep tonight. That didn’t stop her from laying back down and closing her eyes.

Tillie needed time to think straight. These days so much had happened to muddle her mind, and she was starting to wonder if there

was going to be much of her old self left after everything she'd been put through.

Chapter 12

“Stay here and keep watch,” Tarak said to Elan.

“Me?” Elan asked. His eyes were wide as he chewed on the remainder of his dinner.

Tillie had only eaten a few bites of the meat before laying back down on her pallet. She had pretended to be asleep for about an hour before her breath finally evened out.

When she did, Tarak knew that it was his chance to head back to the main camp. He’d been with Tillie all day.

He had worried that she wouldn't wake up, especially when he had seen the blood pouring from the back of her head and into the sand.

"You'll be fine," he told the boy. "You have your bow, and I'll only be a few paces away."

Elan looked fearful despite Tarak's words. He couldn't blame the boy. If it hadn't been for Tillie, he likely would have ended up killed by the coyotes. Tillie's actions saved his life, and because of that, Elan had refused to leave her side for more than a moment.

Tarak smiled at the boy. "You have nothing to worry about," he said. "I promise."

"Why do you want to go back to the main camp?" he said. "You know that the men are just going to say bad things about her." If Elan was standing, Taza was sure that he would

have had his hands on his hips in anger.

He sighed. “They won’t say anything. I’ll make sure of it.”

Elan didn’t say anything, but he grabbed his bow and pulled it closer to his side. Tarak smiled as he looked at Elan’s fierce face. Tillie might not have won over all of the Apache, but she’d made a true friend in Elan.

Tarak said nothing as he walked towards the camp. He wasn’t worried about Elan. Any animals in the vicinity would have been scared off by the sound of the men at camp, and the roaring fire that was blazing.

Tarak sighed as he walked into camp. He needed to talk to Taza about Tillie. He was worried that she wouldn’t be able to do another hard day of riding tomorrow with her

injuries.

Taza had been so fearful that Tillie had been dead that he had ordered they make camp immediately. He'd feared that moving Tillie might make her injuries worse. Luckily, after a few hours of rest, Tillie had woken up. She was trying to be strong, but Tarak could see the pain she was in anytime she moved.

As Tarak came across his brother, he couldn't stop the sigh of frustration that left his lips as he spied his cousin sitting next to his brother.

This can't be good, Tarak thought as he watched Chalipun becoming more and more animated as he spoke with his brother.

"Even you have to admit that this woman has brought us nothing but trouble since we've met her," Chalipun said.

“Coyotes are all over the desert,” Taza said. “You know this.” Taza spoke with an even tone.

“You have to listen to me,” Chalipun said. “If you don’t, there will be men who die for that girl next.”

Tarak felt himself getting angrier as he heard more. He didn’t know how he felt about Tillie anymore, but he did know that she had been willing to sacrifice herself to save Elan, a young boy that she barely knew. It had changed his perspective on Tillie. It was something that he couldn’t ignore.

“Chalipun, you need to shut your mouth,” Tarak said. He could feel the anger getting the better of him. He couldn’t stop himself.

“Don’t tell me that you have been sucked into her web,” Chalipun said. “I warned you that such a thing would happen if you weren’t careful.”

“I haven’t been sucked into anything,” Tarak said. “Tillie saved a young boy’s life.”

“She put his life in danger,” Chalipun bit out. The anger he was expressing towards Tillie concerned Tarak more than ever. He couldn’t believe that his cousin had so much hate in his heart. Tarak was starting to realize that some of what Tillie had accused him of was true.

“We are in the middle of the coyotes’ home,” Tarak reminded Chalipun. “This isn’t the first time we have encountered the animals.”

Chalipun shook his head before getting up from his seat. “She is going to bring danger upon all of us,” he said. “If we don’t get rid of her soon, it will be the end of our tribe.”

Chalipun said nothing further as he walked off. It seemed that he couldn’t go even one moment without thinking about Tillie and his delusions.

“He’s becoming more and more bothersome,” Taza said.

Tarak said nothing as he sat down by his brother. Taza saw Chalipun as a bother, but Tarak saw him as a danger. He wasn’t sure what measures his cousin would take to protect the tribe from the perceived danger that he saw in Tillie.

“Why aren’t you with the girl?” Taza asked.

“You insisted on staying with her all day. From what I heard, you’d barely let the healer help.”

Tarak said nothing. He hadn’t trusted the healer to do his job properly. He was a young man who was barely out of training, and Tarak had seen enough wounds that he knew one to the head could go from a small bump to something deadly if the injured was moved the wrong way.

“Her dying wouldn’t be convenient to your plan,” Tarak reminded his brother. “You can’t broker peace with her father if she’s dead.” Tarak hated the accusation in his voice. He didn’t mean it in the way it sounded, but he wouldn’t forget his brother’s words. He wanted to use this girl to make a deal that was never going to come to fruition.

“Don’t give me that look, Tarak. I can’t deal with both you and Chalipun accusing me of

not putting the tribe first," Taza said. Tarak looked over at his brother. For the first time, his smile and easy-going nature had fled. His brow was furrowed, and he appeared more serious than Tarak remembered seeing him in a while.

"I didn't come here to talk about your plan," he said.

"I don't understand why you don't agree with me," Taza said. "I never thought that out of all my men, my own brother would be against me."

Tarak sighed and pushed his hair back from his forehead. It seemed that Taza wasn't willing to change the subject until the tension between the two of them was addressed. "I'm not against you," Tarak said. "You're my brother and my chief, but I don't agree with you."

“We can’t live in a world without making peace,” Taza said. “Do you think I want to do this? I’m going to be the chief who compromises the Apache way, but I will also be the one who makes sure that we all survive.”

There was a passion in Taza’s voice that Tarak hadn’t heard in a long time, and for the first time, Tarak was beginning to realize that all of this wasn’t a half thought out plan that his brother made up when he saw an opportunity.

“I still don’t understand what you think your plan will accomplish,” Tarak said honestly. “I also don’t think it will work.”

“Tillie’s people need peace just as much as we do,” Taza said. “We might not have their weapons, but if it came to it, they would be no better match for us than we are for them. Both

sides would lose."

Tarak didn't disagree, but he also thought that Taza was ignoring the fact that Tillie's people outnumbered the Apache. The Apache were a proud people who would fight to the end.

Tarak couldn't say that, though. He could tell from his brother's demeanor that he didn't care. He didn't want to hear reason. He only wanted to know that when it came time, Tarak would support him.

"Tillie is injured," he said.

Taza raised a brow. "I'm aware. That's why I gave you the healer."

"The healer doesn't know what he's doing,"

Tarak reminded his brother. “He’s still learning.”

“He’s said that she’s going to be fine,” Taza said. “She seemed well when we spoke.”

Tarak breathed in a slow breath to try and calm himself. He could feel his frustration growing with his brother’s dismissal.

“She’s going to survive fine, but she’s not going to be able to ride hard tomorrow.”

Taza didn’t even wait a moment before he responded. “She doesn’t have a choice,” he said. “We are now two days behind, and many of the men want to get home to their families. You can’t expect them to continue to wait.”

Tarak wanted to remind his brother that he was the one who had delayed their journey. He was the one who called for them to help Tillie in the first place. It seemed that while Taza was happy to have her along, he didn't care about what she was feeling as long as he was able to use her.

Tarak hated that his brother would do such a thing, but he could understand it. Taza didn't believe that the white men were good. He simply believed that making peace with them was a necessary evil.

"It won't look very good to her father if you bring her back injured."

"She's already injured. We'll explain what happened. Tillie will tell him."

Tarak shook his head. "I'm telling you that

this will not go well. She was barely able to keep up when she was at full strength. It's only a matter of time before there's another accident, and this time, Tillie might not be so lucky."

"You sound like Chalipun," Taza said.

Tarak rolled his eyes. "I can take a shortcut and meet you before you even get to Arizona."

Taza shook his head. "You'll have to go through the town," he said. "You won't be welcome."

"It'll be fine," Tarak said. In truth, he was nervous at the thought of separating from his tribe, but he would do it because he knew that if they brought Tillie back to her father injured and barely together, there would be worse consequences.

There was a long silence between the two of them. Tarak didn't know what his brother was going to say. He hoped that he would trust him in the same manner that he was being asked to trust.

Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, Taza released a breath of air. "Fine," he said. "We'll meet in the mountains in a day."

Tarak nodded. He knew that that wasn't enough time, but he suspected that it was all the time they were going to get. Going through the towns instead of around them would make for an easier journey.

"For someone who doesn't like this girl, you are doing a lot to make sure that she survives," Taza said.

Tarak said nothing. He didn't understand it himself.

"Elan is going to come with us," he said.

Taza shook his head. "No," he said. "His mother would scalp me if anything happened to him."

Tarak laughed. Elan's mother was a fierce Apache woman who had made it clear that she expected her youngest son to return home safe and sound. Part of that problem was that she'd raised a kind and compassionate son who wasn't going to leave behind the woman who had saved his life.

"I don't think Elan is going to take that without a fight," Tarak said.

Taza shook his head. “Fine,” he said. “Take the boy, but make sure that all three of you are back safely in one day.”

Tarak nodded. “We’ll meet you at the base of the mountains.”

Taza nodded before turning his attention back to the flames of the fire. The two brothers sat there in silence, each examining the things that were beginning to haunt them.

Chapter 13

For the first time since she'd been with the Apache, Tillie hadn't been woken up before the sun. Instead, it was the brightness of the rising sun in her face that caused her to awaken groggy but well-rested.

When she looked around, she could see Elan laying on a pallet near her, and Tarak at her feet, readying the horses. She sat up quickly in surprise. "What's going on?" she asked. It seemed to be one of her premiere questions these days.

"Did you sleep well?" Tarak asked. His voice was friendlier than she had heard before, and she was sure that she was imagining it. Looking around, Tillie realized that it was much quieter than it should have been. It was also brighter than it had been on other days

when the tribe had packed up for the morning.

“Where is everyone?” she asked. Her eyes began searching around, and the action caused a splitting sensation in her neck and head. She released a small gasp before placing her hand against her neck.

“They went ahead.”

“Ahead?” Tillie shouted. “They just left us?” She wouldn’t have been surprised if the tribe had left her, but she knew they wouldn’t leave Tarak or Elan.

Tarak bent down toward her. “Are you hurting?” he asked. He was kneeling before her, and his fingers were in her hair before she could say anything. She hissed as Tarak pressed a tender spot at the back of her neck.

“The healer left me some herbs to help,” Elan said.

Tillie’s eyes went wide as the two started mothering her. She might have expected such treatment from Elan, but she hadn’t expected the same from Tarak. He hadn’t been hostile towards her, but he hadn’t been friendly either.

“When did you wake up?” she asked.

“I’ve been up, but I figured I’d wait until you were awake. Tarak said we should let you get some rest after last night.”

Tillie was grateful. She hadn’t realized how much she had needed the rest. Even before she traveled with the Apache, she had been on the

road for weeks. Before, she had been too angry to get much rest. Now, she was too fearful. It seemed that a head injury was the only thing that could stop her mind from constantly going.

“Where is everyone?” Tillie asked again.

“You should chew on the herbs,” Tarak said. “I’d let you rest longer, but we are going to need to get going soon. We don’t have too much time to waste.”

“I’ll chew on them when you explain to me what is going on,” Tillie said. She started to get to her feet, but her bones were still sore, and her muscles were stiff from laying on the hard ground for so many hours.

“Easy,” Tarak said. He reached out and steadied her as she got to her feet.

“The rest of the tribe went on ahead. They’ve got another grueling day of riding head to try and make up the time. You needed rest, so I suggested we stay back.”

“That’s not going to help us to make up the time,” Tillie said. She pressed her fingers to her neck as she tried to massage away the pain in her head.

Tarak chuckled. “We are going to go through the next town instead of around it,” he said.

Tillie blinked in the bright sun. It wasn’t making her headache any better. “Why doesn’t the tribe go through the towns?” she asked. She hadn’t thought too much about it until now but going through the towns would have been much quicker than going around them.

Tarak and Elan gave her an odd look, and she immediately knew why they didn't go through the town. "Oh," she said. She looked down at her feet. She couldn't believe that the Apache's faced such discrimination. She wanted to make some sort of excuse for her people, but she didn't know what to say.

"Are you two going to be okay going through these towns?" she asked. She was more concerned about Elan than Tarak. Tarak was more than capable of taking care of himself, and there was nothing that her people could do to him that he would find even more offensive than their existence.

"We'll be fine," Tarak said. "Townspeople are used to one or two of us. A whole tribe might be a problem."

Tillie hoped that he was right. She didn't want

any sort of confrontation to stop their small group from meeting up with the rest of the tribe. She was less concerned about the time it would take for her to make it back to her father, and more concerned about what might happen to them if they were away from the safety of the tribe.

She shivered as she remembered that there was still a man out there who wanted her gold. Gold she hadn't thought twice about since she'd been on the road back home.

"When do we go?" Tillie asked. She wasn't interested in spending more time recovering. Her head and body were aching but sticking around the campsite was making her incredibly anxious.

"After you chew on these herbs," Tarak said. Elan was looking at her with wide eyes as he reached out his hand for her to take the herbs.

Tillie sighed and rolled her eyes, but she took the herbs he was offering her. She popped them in her mouth and began chewing. They were a mixture of sour and sweet, and no matter how much she wanted to spit them on the ground, she couldn't. Tarak and Elan were looking at her, so she continued chewing, praying that these would at least make the pain in her head subside.

They attracted several stares riding through town. Tillie suspected that it had more to do with the fact that she was sitting on the same horse as Tarak than the fact that she was traveling with two Apaches.

"This was not a great way to avoid attention," she grumbled under her breath at him.

Tarak chuckled, but she could feel the tenseness of his body behind her back. She suspected that he agreed with her though he would never say such a thing.

“I think people are staring because you look a mess,” he told her.

Tillie scowled. She hadn’t looked in a mirror, but she knew that she looked terrible. Her dress was dirty and ripped. Her blonde hair, which usually fell in soft curls around her face, was matted with blood, and she was sure that she had bruises on her cheeks from the fall.

“They probably think we kidnapped you,” he muttered as they road deeper and deeper into the town. It was only mid-day, and they’d been riding at a leisurely pace, but Tillie was starting to feel the pain in her body returning

full force.

“Do you think they’ll call their sheriff?” she asked. She felt her heart starting to beat slightly faster at the thought.

She could feel Tarak shaking his head. “This is an outpost town,” he said. “I doubt that they want to be involved in any kidnapping plot. The people in towns like this mind their own business.”

Tillie said nothing. She couldn’t imagine just standing back and watching something terrible happen, but as she thought more about it, she wondered how many times she’d ignored injustices because she could. She had grown up with the ability to hide her head in the sand about the struggles that others had.

She sighed. Tillie couldn’t help but wonder if

she was being punished because of her ignorance.

“What’s wrong?” Tarak asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Are you in pain?” Tarak asked.

He’d been asking her that question for most of the ride. Her pain was the reason that she had to ride with him instead of on her own. Tillie was secretly grateful. She didn’t think that she would have been able to get on a horse on her own.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Maybe we should stop at one of these inns,” he said. His eyes looked around as he scouted their surroundings.

“No,” Tillie said. “We need to continue.” She didn’t like the idea of stopping in the town. She would have killed for a bath, but she would just have to clean herself in the next river they found.

“You don’t need to worry about Elan and me,” he said. “We will make do.”

Tillie wasn’t worried about them. Not entirely. She didn’t care to dig into her satchel for the gold that they would need in order to book a room. That gold would make her a target. It already had, and she was worried about bringing that kind of scrutiny upon their now much smaller group.

So, despite the fact that she wanted nothing more than a feather-filled bed and a hot tub of water, she knew that those things weren't an option if she cared to continue breathing.

"We need to keep going," she said. She gritted her teeth as their horse hit a small rough patch in the ground, causing her to bounce hard in the saddle.

Tillie would grit her teeth and bear whatever came next. She was determined to make it home and find justice for her friends, and Tillie wasn't going to let something like pain stop her. There was someone out there, who lived under her father's nose, who had set her on this path, and Tillie wouldn't be satisfied until she saw him pay for his crimes.

She owed that to Henry and James, and she wouldn't forget.

Chapter 14

Their small band had made it through the town by the time the sun fell. Tarak was grateful for that. Though he wouldn't say it aloud, he was worried that they would be even further behind if they didn't pick up their pace, especially after he offered for them to stop at an inn.

He hadn't really wanted to do such a thing. Not only because the thought of not sleeping out amongst the stars made his chest tighten in worry, but also because Tarak was worried that someone really would call the sheriff.

He had done his best for both Elan and Tillie to appear calm as they rode through the town. But the stares and whispers of the people they had passed, knotted his stomach. He knew what it looked like and though he suspected

that these people wouldn't want any potential trouble, he knew that it only took one person for their entire situation to escalate to something none of them wanted.

He'd been relieved when Tillie had stated that she wanted to continue onwards, and he'd made an effort for them to stop near a body of water. He knew that she wanted to bathe—it had been days—so he did what he could to accommodate her.

"What's taking her so long?" Elan asked.

Tarak laughed slightly. Elan's eyes had been wide as they went through the town. He'd been slightly disappointed when it was decided that they would not be staying at an inn.

"I'm sure that she wants a break in the water."

“Who takes a break in the water?” he asked. His small face was scrunched up as he considered it.

Tarak agreed. When he bathed, he did so quickly, but Tillie had warned him that she would be gone for a while, and for them not to come looking for her.

It was a challenge. Tarak didn’t like that the three of them were split up from one another. He was worried about what could happen if he wasn’t there. He also understood that Tillie’s people were much more modest than the Apache, and he wanted to respect her. That didn’t mean that he wasn’t inherently nervous.

“Her people think of bathing differently than us,” Tarak explained.

Elan nodded. “Clothes too,” he said. “Did you see all the parts of her dress? I don’t know how she rides in that thing.”

Tarak tried not to laugh at Elan’s words. He remembered the first time that he’d seen a woman like Tillie. She had been wearing a big dress made of fabrics and colors that Tarak had never seen before.

He’d been a combination of fascinated and horrified.

“I promise that it’s not as bad as it looks,” Tillie said. She had walked silently up the ridge where they had made their camp. Tarak jumped up slightly, surprised and angry at himself for allowing Tillie to sneak up on him.

“But it’s so much,” Elan said. “It’s much better to wear our Apache clothing.”

Elan smiled. “When riding for days in the sun, I must say that I don’t disagree.”

Elan smiled at her brightly.

“When we get to our home, I’ll have my sister make you a dress.”

Tarak expected Tillie to explain to Elan that she wouldn’t be going to their home, or that it wouldn’t be appropriate for her to wear a dress from a people who were not her own.

But Tillie never did exactly what Tarak expected of her.

“That would be nice,” she told Elan. “I would wear it with honor.”

Elan smiled brightly at her.

“You should go and bath,” Tarak told the boy. “And fill up your waterskin.”

Elan scrunched his nose as he prepared to argue. “The water is nice and cool,” Tillie told him. “It’ll help beat some of the heat.”

Elan sighed as he grabbed his waterskin and started making his way down towards the water.

Tarak took that moment to get a look at Tillie.

Her hair was cleaner from the water, and her skin was clear of dirt. She had changed her dress and was now wearing a light blue gown that was much cleaner than her previous one had been.

As the firelight played across her face, Tarak winced. The side of her head was a ghastly purple and yellow from her fall.

“He’s such a curious boy,” Tillie said. The sound of her voice broke Tarak away from his examination.

“Curiosity isn’t always a good thing,” he thought. Tarak had been a curious boy, and it had caused him more pain than almost anything in his life. He learned the hard way what could happen when you were too curious about things.

“I don’t agree,” Tillie said. “I wish I had been more curious growing up. I never questioned things. I never asked my father why things were the way they were. I simply accepted them until those things were no longer acceptable.”

Tarak was surprised by how much Tillie was opening up to him. It was something that he hadn’t expected from her. For most of their journey, she hadn’t spoken more than a few words, and when she did, it was often in anger towards him.

“Why were you traveling out there alone?” he asked her. It was a question that had been eating away at him since he came upon her stagecoach. He didn’t know much about the white men, but he knew that they had very specific rules for their women, especially the ones with great wealth.

He couldn’t understand why Tillie’s father

would have sent her so far away from home with a large amount of gold and very little protection.

“What?” Tillie asked, clearly shocked by his question.

“Why did your father send you so far from your home?” Tarak repeated. From the wideness of Tillie’s eyes, Tarak could tell that she hadn’t been expecting such a question from him.

He wondered if she would tell him the truth or lie. He questioned whether he would be able to tell the difference. Tarak wanted to believe that Tillie was a good person. That despite the crimes her people had wrought against his own, that she was not someone who secretly condoned such things.

He couldn't believe that she after she'd been willing to risk her life for Elan, but some small part of him still questioned her motivations, and he needed reassurance from her before he put anything else on the line.

"He was sending me to California to be married," she said. There was a flatness to her voice that startled Tarak more than her words did.

"You didn't wish to go?" he asked. It was more of a statement than a question, as he suspected that he already knew her answer. Still, he found himself desperate to learn more about this woman who was so unlike everything he had come to believe about her people.

She released a small snort. "Not in the slightest," she said. "It wasn't that I opposed a marriage. I'd been told my entire life that marriage was where I most belonged. I simply didn't want to marry a man who was old

enough to be my father."

Tarak didn't know what to say, so he simply nodded. Apache's generally chose their mates, and sometimes younger women married seasoned warriors. He knew that it was different in Tillie's world, though.

"I begged my father not to send me," she said, opening up more than Tarak had hoped.

"He didn't listen?" Tarak asked. He wasn't necessarily surprised. He knew enough about Tillie's people to know that women had very little say in such things. For the Apache, it was different. The women had their roles, but they were respected.

"He did not," she said with a small chuckle and a shake of her head. Both of those things lacked mirth. "He was adamant that I go."

There was anger in her voice.

As Tarak listened to Tillie speak, he was more and more sure that her father wasn't going to be open to helping the Apache if he didn't want to. If the man wouldn't listen to his own daughter, he wasn't going to listen to a bunch of Apache.

"I wonder if he's worried about me?" she asked. She was looking into the fire with sad eyes.

"I'm sure that he is," Tarak said. "I imagine that he will be very happy to have you back."

It was exactly what Taza was hoping would happen. His brother believed that Tillie's father would be so grateful to have Tillie returned to him that he would willingly broker some goodwill between the Apache and the

people of his town.

“What about your father?” she asked. “What’s he like.”

Tarak sighed. Sometimes he forgot that Tillie didn’t know much about the Apache, and by much, he suspected that everything she knew, she had learned in the last few days.

“He passed many years ago,” he said. “That’s why Taza is chief.”

Tillie’s face immediately fell. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I should have known that.”

Tarak could tell that she really was apologetic, so he decided not to focus on the slight. Chalipun would have seen it as something that

was intentional, but Tarak knew that Tillie simply didn't understand how the Apache lived.

"It's alright," he said.

There was a tension between the two of them, and Tarak suspected that neither of them knew what to say.

Tarak sighed and reached into his saddlebag. "Here," he said, handing Tillie a piece of jerky. "I didn't want to leave you two to try and find some game," he explained.

Tillie took it and bit off a piece of the edge. "Thank you," she said.

The two of them were sitting there together

chewing on their jerky, lost in their own thoughts.

“My father was a good man,” Tarak said. He didn’t know why he was talking about his father with Tillie. He hadn’t spoken about his father since his death. He believed that his father was at rest, and it was too painful for him to remember. “He made us warriors and prepared us to take on the world.”

Tillie smiled as she swallowed her jerky. Her smile wasn’t as wide as he’d seen it before, and he could tell that it was not a happy smile. “I don’t think that my father prepared me for much of anything,” she said.

Tarak wasn’t sure if he agreed with that. Tillie was much more prepared for the world than she seemed to think. Tarak didn’t know many women who would be able to survive as much as she did.

“He was killed by smallpox,” he said.

Tillie sucked in a small breath, and she immediately looked down at the ground. He knew that she was picking up the parts that he hadn’t spoken aloud. Tarak’s father had gone to war with the white men when they first took over the Apache land. He’d survived many injuries, but eventually, smallpox took him.

“I’m sorry,” Tillie said.

Tarak said nothing. He felt a great deal of emotion in his chest, and he wanted nothing more than to take back his words. He didn’t want to talk about his father, especially with Tillie, but he also had this desire to share things with her. He wanted her to understand why he, and so many of the other men, didn’t trust her. And why some of them never would.

“My mother died from smallpox,” she said, startling Tarak out of his thoughts.

He turned to look at her, his eyes wide. He knew that Tillie’s people also caught the fever and died, but he hadn’t known any who hadn’t survived the disease.

“She was pregnant with my brother. Neither of them survived the illness. I got sick, but I was able to be nursed back to health.” Tillie’s voice was thick with emotion as she spoke. It was clear to Tarak that she still felt the pain of her mother’s death just as acutely as he felt the pain of his father’s.

“I’m sorry,” Tarak said, echoing the sentiment that she had spoken earlier.

Tillie gave him a slightly sad smile as she chewed on another piece of jerky. He wanted to say something to her to ease her pain, but he knew well enough to know that there wasn't anything that could be said.

"Thank you for telling me more about your father," Tillie said. She was staring into the fire.

"Thank you for telling me about your mother," Tarak said.

Tillie's eyes met his, and for the first moment, Tarak felt himself wondering if all of his anger towards her and her people had been misplaced. Maybe the white men weren't all bad. Maybe they were just like the Apache—some bad and some good.

Chapter 15

“How much further do you think we have to ride before we are at the edge of the mountain?” Tillie asked. She was riding with Tarak once more, and while his presence helped to alleviate some of her pain, ever since her injury, she felt herself getting tired more easily.

Tarak told her that it was because of the herbs, but Tillie wondered if all the trauma of the past few weeks was finally catching up with her. She wasn’t sleeping well even before she had taken to the road with the Apache, and that hadn’t helped the situation.

“We should be there in a few miles,” Tarak said. He’d been quiet all day. Not that Tillie had expected him to be anything else. Tarak was always very intense. When he hated her,

he did so intensely. When he was thinking, he also did it intensely.

It might not have bothered Tillie if she had been able to ask Tarak what he was thinking. Even though last night it felt like they had come to some sort of silent agreement, in truth, there was still a great deal of tension between them.

Tillie wasn't sure if they would ever be able to be friends, but she hoped that the two of them would be able to move forward with some sort of understanding while the Apache were helping her to get back to her home.

She had been surprised last night when Tarak had opened up about his father. She hadn't expected him to ever tell her anything about himself. It was why she had opened up about what had happened to her mother, which was something she hadn't talked about with anyone, ever. Tillie often didn't talk about her

mother. The pain that she felt was too great when she thought about it. She suspected that the same thing was true about Tarak.

“How are you feeling?” he asked for the umpteenth time.

Tillie rolled her eyes. “I’m fine,” she said. It wasn’t necessarily the truth, but there was nothing that Tarak could do about it. “We can ride faster if we need to.”

Tillie looked out over the horizon, where the sun was beginning to set, and Elan was leagues ahead of them.

“You don’t need to go so slow on my account,” she told Tarak. “I assure you that I’m much tougher than I look.”

“I’m sure that you are,” Tarak said. Tillie could hear the sarcasm in his voice, and she couldn’t stop herself from rolling her eyes. Tarak wasn’t going to go faster no matter what he said, and he wasn’t going to stop asking her if she was alright.

She wanted to believe that it was because he cared about her—that they had built some sort of caring relationship, even if it wasn’t a friendship—but she couldn’t stop wondering if he cared because of his brother’s plan.

“Your brother isn’t going to be pleased if we aren’t back in time. He might send a search party after us,” she said.

She didn’t know if that was true or not, but she suspected it might be. Taza was the chief of their tribe, which meant that Tarak was the second in line. She assumed that made him pretty important.

“I swear to you that we will be back in time,” he told her. Tillie said nothing, but as she looked over the horizon, she worried if that was the truth.

“May I ask you a question?” Tillie asked. She could ‘t convince Tarak that she was fine, and she was tired of trying. She was also tired of sitting in silence. She figured if they were going to ride at the speed of molasses, then they could at least talk with one another.

“Didn't you just ask a question?” Tarak asked her. Tilly smirked. Tarak had a way of making her laugh even when he didn't mean to. She suspected that he was joking with her, at least she hoped so.

Tilly rolled her eyes at him, but she went forward with her question anyway. “Why

would you ask Elan to come with us?" she wondered as she looked out at the younger boy. He was riding quickly, bored by their slow pace.

"Elan wasn't going to let us go without him," he said. "He's very protective of you."

Warmth overtook Tillie's chest as she looked out at the young boy. They had only known one another for a few days, but she felt kismet with Elan. He reminded her of the younger brother that she hadn't had a chance to know.

"He's a kind boy," she said. "His parents must be very proud of him." Tillie didn't know much about the Apache, but she wouldn't imagine that any parents wouldn't value kindness in their child.

"His mother is the only one still alive," he

said. “His father died shortly after he was born.”

“From smallpox?” Tillie asked. The thought sucked all of the moisture from her mouth. She was worried that Elan would blame her the same way that Tarak obviously did. She understood it, but it also felt wholly unfair.

Tarak shook his head. “No,” he said. “He was ill. I’m not sure what took him, but I know that he was ill for a long time.”

Tillie nodded. She looked at Elan, and her heart went out to the young boy. She wondered if he missed his father. She had lost her mother when she was too young to remember her much.

“He’s got an older brother who married a woman who many suspect her father was a

white man," he said. "It's why he's much more open to you than some of the other boys."

"I think they are scared of me," Tillie said. "A bit silly if you ask me."

"They've heard many stories about the evilness of your people," he told her. His voice wasn't harsh, but Tillie couldn't stop the way that his words stiffened her shoulders.

"A lot of my people might be fearful of the evilness of yours," she said. Her words were biting.

"I suppose that is true as well," he told her.

His arms were encircled around her waist, and she felt them stiffen from her words. She

sighed heavily. “I don’t like when you accuse me of things that I haven’t done,” she told him. “Before you, I never met an Apache.”

“I have met your people,” he said. “They aren’t all like you.”

Tillie said nothing. She knew that that was the most that she was going to get from Tarak. It was necessarily an apology, but at least he was starting to see the difference between her and the people who had done him wrong.

Tillie said nothing as they rode onward. She would be glad when they finally were back with the larger tribe.

Tarak had been right. They had made it to the base of the mountain by the time the sun was setting. Tarak had practically ordered her to sit near the fire as he went to talk to his brother. Elan went to talk to his friends, regaling them with tales of their short trip.

When Tillie found a seat near the fire, she had been alone. Most of the men were taking care of their horses and were happy to ignore her. Now, though, as the sun lowered in the sky, the men had started to sit around her.

They ignored her as they started speaking to one another. She was grateful that no one was paying her much attention. Tarak's words still rang in her mind. Tillie was a reminder to some of these men of the things they had lost, and while she hadn't personally done anything to any of the Apache, they still blamed her.

"Tell us a story of your triumphs," one of the men said to another. The men all laughed,

though Tillie didn't know why.

"I don't think that you have many of those," another man said. There was laughter around the circle. Someone lit a pipe, and the smell of the tobacco was something that Tillie had never smelled before. They were sharing the pipe as they spoke. One man would puff on it and then pass it to someone next to him.

Tillie hadn't seen anything like this before.

"I'll tell you a story," another man said. This man drew everyone's attention. He was tall and thick with muscle. Unlike Taza and Tarak, who had long hair, this man's hair was shaved closer to his skull. His eyes connected with Tillie's, and she shivered as he stared at him. There was something cold in them that made fear slither up and down her spine.

“Go on, Chalipun!” one of the men called out.

The man, Chalipun, gave her a long smile. “When I was a boy, my father wanted to help the white men. He worried that they would all die without the help of the Apache,” he said. His words were actually much nicer than Tillie had expected them to be, and she found herself leaning forward to listen.

“The white men were grateful for the Apache’s help. They didn’t know how to work the land, and if it wasn’t for the Apache, they might not have made it,” Chalipun said. “Things were good, for a while, but then, the white men got greedy.”

There was a low rumble across the circle, and Tillie tried her best not to squirm in her seat. She knew what was coming next. Tarak hadn’t told her this story, but he had told her how many of the Apache viewed her people.

“The white men weren’t happy living peacefully on Apache land. They wanted to take the land for themselves,” Chalipun said. “They took their guns and their illnesses to the Apache. They brought evil spirits that killed the tribe elders, and those who survived were finished by their weapons of their fevers.”

The men were all muttering as Chalipun spoke, but Tillie’s cheeks were on fire. She suspected that Chalipun was telling this particular story to her. “The Apache vowed to stay away from the white men after that. They knew what kind of evil lived in their souls. The Apache knew that the white men weren’t going to be happy until they took everything good from the world and corrupted it.”

Now, it wasn’t just Chalipun’s eyes that were on her. Every man around the circle was staring at her with disdain. Tillie couldn’t stand it anymore.

“That’s not true!” Tillie shouted.

“You’re calling me a liar?” Chalipun asked. His eyes narrowed, and Tillie did her best to try and stay strong. She was not going to allow this man to accuse her of things that she had never done before.

“I’m telling you that I’m not any more evil than you are,” she said. “I’ve never done anything to anyone, especially one of the Apache.” Tillie wanted to remind this man, all the men, that she had nearly died to save Elan, but she held her tongue. She was sure that they would just use that to accuse her of something else.

“You’ll bring evil upon us,” Chalipun said to her. “You already have. Look at all the things that have happened since she’s been here.”

None of the men said anything to her, but there was a grumble of agreement that went around the circle, and Tillie knew that these men did see her presence as a thing of evil, and if they didn't, they were at least open to Chalipun's words.

"I assure you all that I simply want to get home," she told them, trying once more to try and reason with them. Though she knew that some of these men, like Chalipun, couldn't be reasoned with, she hoped that others would be open to seeing her as something more than a harbinger of doom.

Chalipun said nothing. He didn't need to. None of the men would look at her, and several of them had scowls on their faces.

She scowled as she got up from her seat and dusted the bottom of her dress. "I hope that

you all have a nice evening," she said. She wanted to tell that they were listening to a man who was angry and irrational, but she didn't see the point.

These men had made up their minds about her, and Tillie couldn't think of anything that she could do to change them. She felt as though she had made inroads with Tarak. He saw her as a person and not just as one of her people.

Sighing, she walked away from the group. She wanted to go and find Elan or Tarak. She needed to see a friendly face, and they were the only two people at camp who would talk to her.

Tillie hated that Chalipun had gotten to her, but he had, and she needed someone to remind her that she wasn't an evil person.

Chapter 16

Tarak released a sigh and closed his eyes. After their small group had arrived, he had immediately gone to speak with Taza. Taza had reported that they'd ridden hard for the last day, and that all were exhausted, but they were back on pace to be in Arizona by the end of the week.

Tarak was relieved. The sooner they got Tillie back to her father, the sooner the tribe would be able to move on. Tarak reached into his saddlebag and pulled out a small, wooden flute.

Music was one of Tarak's passions. He hadn't played for weeks. The men were too loud and rowdy for him to truly enjoy the music, and he hadn't been able to get away for more than a few moments.

Tarak played a solemn tune that reflected his mood. The music calmed his nerves and started to calm the nerves that had started to frazzle. He continued playing, allowing himself to become enraptured in his tune, so much so that he couldn't hear that he didn't hear the sound of footsteps approaching until Tillie was almost next to him.

When her face came into view, Tarak immediately pulled the flute from his lips.

"Don't stop on my account," she said.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "I thought I told you to stay near the fire."

A sour look overtook Tillie's face. Her nose

scrunched up, and she looked away from him. “It was made clear that I wasn’t welcome there.”

Tarak sighed. He knew that it was ridiculous for him to try and force Tillie on the men, but he thought that he might be able to catch his breath without her being near him. The conversation that the two of them had on the road made him question many things that he thought that he had known. He didn’t think that Taza’s plan would work, especially after hearing more about Tillie’s father, but he couldn’t ignore the part of him that was beginning to wonder if there was some sanity to what Taza was suggesting.

He sighed as he looked at Tillie. It was clear to him that his efforts to stay away from her, even for a few moments, had put her in a situation to upset her. That hadn’t been his intention. He assumed that the worst that might happen to him was that Tillie would be ignored by the men.

“I’m sorry,” Tarak said. He meant it.

Tillie shrugged. “It’s not your fault that everyone here thinks that I’m evil incarnate.”

Tarak groaned. “You meant Chalipun,” he said.

Tillie nodded. “He’s a wonderful storyteller. He told the gripping tale of how the evil white men stole the Apache land and spread disease and death throughout the Apache.”

Tarak closed his eyes as he considered what Chalipun might have said. He suspected that there was much more to it than what Tillie was saying. He could only imagine. Chalipun had been waiting to have a confrontation with Tillie since the moment Taza made the

announcement that they would be taking her home.

“You shouldn’t be too upset,” Tarak said. “No one cares too much for what Chalipun has to say.”

Tillie started laughing. “I’m not so sure about that,” she said. She pursed her lips as she spoke. “The men seemed perfectly happy to think that I am evil and that I mean to bring pain upon the Apache people.”

“He said what?” Tarak stood up a little straighter.

Tillie shrugged slightly. “Chalipun wasn’t just going on about the evils of the white man,” she told him. “That, I might be able to swallow. What my people have done to yours….” Tillie trailed off as she spoke, and

Tarak couldn't help the guilt that crept up into his chest.

"The Apache may have been wronged, but I think there might be some truth to what you've been saying. Maybe, we are all wrong in some ways."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked him.

Tarak considered her words carefully. He was an Apache, and he believed that his people had been wronged, gravely wronged, by Tillie's. He also believed that there were bad Apache who wanted to bring pain to innocent people. Just as he thought that there were good people like Tillie who wanted peace. It was a new concept for him and one that he was struggling to understand.

"I do," he said. "I don't think I'll ever trust

your people fully, but I don't think that you are evil," he told her.

The smile that she gave him was lovely, even in the darkness. Tarak couldn't ignore that something about Tillie's beauty, her softness, appealed to him. Despite only a few days having passed, he couldn't seem to get her out of his head.

"I'm glad," she said. "I don't think that I would have been able to handle it if you also thought I was evil."

Tarak examined Tillie. It was dark where they were illuminated only by the moonlight, but he could still make out the soft planes of her face. He could see small tracks of wetness on her skin, and he knew that she had been crying. He was surprised. He didn't think that the opinion of a couple of Apache men meant so much to her.

Sometimes in all of her fierceness, Tarak forgot that she was just a young girl. Tarak didn't know much about women, but he knew that whether they were from his people or Tillie, they tended to be more sensitive than men.

"Don't let Chalipun bother you too much," he said.

Tillie leveled him with a hard look. She crossed her hands over her arms and pursed her lips once more. "Because no one listens to him?" she asked. "Is that why?"

Tarak shook his head. He walked towards Tillie, shortening the space between them in two short strides. He reached out to place his hands on her shoulders but stopped himself. He knew that her people didn't openly touch one another, and he wanted to respect her, so

he placed his hands back at his sides.

“Chalipun is angrier than the rest of us,” he said. “His father was my father’s brother” Tarak didn’t want to make any excuses for his cousin’s behavior, but he wanted Tillie to understand it. If she did, he hoped that she would understand why she had to stay away from Chalipun and be wary of the other men.

“His father was your uncle?” Tillie asked. “I have to admit I’m shocked. He’s very different from you and Taza.”

“Chalipun has always been a bit more prone to anger than the two of us. Taza and I have been trained to lead the tribe.”

Tillie nodded. “So, Chalipun got all the privilege without any of the responsibility.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Tarak said.

Tarak wasn’t sure that he would go as far as to say that Chalipun was given any sort of privilege. All Apache men were expected to protect the tribe. Chalipun was a great warrior, which made what he was doing all the more dangerous. Chalipun was respected by the men for his prowess in battle, and now, Tarak worried that they would begin to agree with some of his delusions.

“But Chalipun’s hatred does not come from nowhere,” he told her. “His father supported mine when he tried to build ties between the white men and the Apache.” Tarak shook his head slightly as he thought about his father’s idealism.

In many ways, Taza was following in their father’s footsteps, and that made Tarak

incredibly worried.

“What happened?” Tillie asked.

Tarak closed his eyes as he recalled all the pain that the wars had brought to his people. He’d grown up in the midst of it all, and it was what had fueled his anger towards Tillie’s people. It was an anger that he wasn’t sure he would ever understand. That was also why he understood Chalipun. He had an understanding of what made Chalipun hate Tillie because he felt parts of that too.

“His father fought many battles with your people. He killed a great deal of them too,” he said. The infamy of Chalipun’s father was legendary.

“Were all of those people that he killed evil?” Tillie asked. There was a bite to her voice as

she spoke.

“What?” Tarak asked. He was confused by her question.

“I’ve heard stories about the Apache attacking small settlements that are mostly women and children,” she said. “You accuse my people of being evil, but your people create just as much carnage.”

Tarak felt himself growing angry at her. “The Apache would never do what you are saying,” he said. ‘We don’t kill indiscriminately. That would keep us from moving on in the afterlife. There was no honor in killing someone who is helpless.”

“You grew up hearing and seeing stories about the evilness about my people, and I grew up hearing about the evilness of yours. I don’t

need to hear about how Chalipun's father was killed in a war with my people. I didn't kill him. My father didn't kill him, and I'm tired of being punished." Tillie's voice got louder and louder. Tarak could feel the passion in it as she spoke.

"That's not my intention," Tarak said. "I'm just trying to get you to understand."

Tillie sighed and moved away from him. Her hair had been pulled back into a long braid, and as the moonlight hit it, the strands turned white. "I understand that no matter what I do, some of the Apache will blame me for the actions of people who I've never even met."

This wasn't the first time that Tillie had said something like this, and the more she did, the more Tarak was beginning to see her point. The two of them sat there for a few minutes staring at one another, neither willing to blink as they considered if they could overcome the

chasm that had been built between the two of them long before they had met.

“Where did you learn to play the flute?” Tillie asked after a few minutes.

Tarak felt as though he had whiplash from the way that Tillie changed the subject, but he wasn’t going to say anything. There wasn’t much that either of them could do about Chalipun’s hate.

“My grandfather taught me,” he said. He smiled as he pressed his fingers against the wooden pipe that had been in his family for generations. He wasn’t a sentimental person but looking at the flute reminded him of simpler times. “Do you play any instruments?”

Tillie snorted. “My father tried to get me to play anything. My nanny would say that nice,

accomplished young ladies played music."

That sounded like the oddest thing Tarak had ever heard. For his people, music was a lot of things, but it wasn't something that they looked for in a mate, and it certainly wasn't something that anyone would consider useful.

"Did you learn?" he asked.

Tillie shook her head. "I was hopeless," she said. "I had very little coordination, and I couldn't learn to read the music correctly."

Tarak shook his head. "Maybe you had a bad teacher," he said.

Tillie shrugged. "Probably. I also think I wasn't a very good student."

Tarak laughed. He could only imagine. He handed Tillie the flute. “Would you like to learn?”

“Really?” Tillie asked. Her eyes were wide. “You would teach me?”

Tarak nodded. He was just as surprised as Tillie. But things were difficult enough for Tillie at the camp that Tarak thought that she might find a little comfort in music, just as he did.

“I can’t promise that I’ll be any good,” Tillie said.

Tarak shrugged. “Lucky for you, I don’t think that accomplishment and music go together.”

Tillie smiled, and Tarak suspected that he would have done almost anything to make sure that smile stayed on her face.

Chapter 17

Two days after Tillie's run-in with Chalipun, and things were still mostly the same. She, Tarak, and Elan were back on the road with the tribe. Things weren't better between her and the men. Most of them watched her with a wary eye, nervous that she might impart some sort of evilness upon them, but none of them said anything to her.

Tillie still didn't think that it was fair that the men judged her so harshly, but there was nothing she could do about it. They weren't willing to give her a chance.

Their wariness was easier to bear now that she had Tarak and Elan on her side. Elan was her constant companion on the road. Now that she had been deemed healed enough to ride on her own, she was back at the end of the group.

Elan, who she knew was a capable rider, always stayed next to her chatting and reminding her to reapply the aloe on her face. She reminded him to drink from his waterskin, which was something that he tended to forget. She smiled as she thought about it.

Elan was an animated boy who had come out of his shell in her presence. She'd learned a great deal about his family, and she told him stories about her father's ranch. Their friendship was easy. Tillie thought about Elan as the little brother that she had never had.

"Are you alright?" Elan asked her.

"I'm fine," Tillie said. "Why?"

“You’re awfully quiet,” he said.

Tillie chuckled.

“I don’t think she can get in a word with you yapping all day,” Tarak said.

“I’m not yapping!” Elan rebutted.

Tillie and Tarak smiled at one another. That was another thing that had changed. She and Tarak had come to some sort of silent agreement. He rode beside her and Elan through some of their time on the road, and she appreciated his presence.

When Tarak wasn’t hating her, he was actually a very calming presence. He was jovial around Elan and would tell the young boys

surrounding them stories of his adventures. At every stop, he would make sure that she had food and water despite all the looks that he got from his cousin and friends.

“I’m sorry, Elan,” Tillie said, trying to soothe the tension between the two of them. “I was lost in thought.”

“Probably because it’s so hot out,” Elan said. “It’s hard to think, especially if you aren’t used to it.”

Tillie suppressed a laugh at the young boy’s seriousness. “That must be it,” she said.

“Boys,” Tarak said. Almost all of the young men at the back of the group turned to look at Tarak. “Ride ahead. Tell Taza that there’s some rough land ahead. Make sure that he warns the men.”

The four boys around them nodded as if they were military men receiving a general's orders.

"I thought you might want a break from them," Tarak said.

"No," Tillie told him. "They are sweet. Most of them are too scared to talk to me, but I think they are starting to warm up." At least they were after spending hours and hours on the road. By the time night came, and they were told stories about the evilness of her people, they would all be scared of her once more.

"I'm sorry," Tarak said.

Tillie shrugged slightly and blinked tears back

from her eyes. She couldn't stop herself. The boys were sweet, and she hated the idea of being a villain to a bunch of children, but once more, she knew that there was nothing that she could do about it.

"It's fine," she said. Her voice was thick with emotion that Tillie was sure that he picked up on.

"Is there really bad land ahead?" Tillie asked. She felt nervous. Things had been quiet the last few days, and Tillie wanted to keep it that way. It almost felt as though she was thwarting Chalipun by proving to him that she wasn't the harbinger of doom that he thought she was.

Tarak nodded. "I've ridden these roads many times. There's another tribe in the mountains that we trade with," he explained. "There's a patch of land full of cacti up ahead. If you don't navigate them carefully, they can lame

your horse."

Tillie nodded. Growing up in Arizona, she was familiar with the flora of the area. "I've had many a cacti injury," she said, shivering slightly. "Painful."

Tarak raised an eyebrow at her. It was clear that he was surprised that she would know so much, which Tillie found amusing. Tarak knew very little about her people, despite what he thought.

"Where did you learn to ride so well?" he asked her.

Tillie looked at him in surprise. "You think I ride well?" she asked.

Tarak rolled his eyes at her. Tillie smiled. She liked this Tarak. The one who wasn't the serious and tortured Apache warrior. The one who was soft and smiled at her jokes.

"My father's ranch foreman taught me," she said. "Before my ma died, she was adamant that I learn how to ranch. She wanted to give my father a son so bad, but she wanted me to be prepared to inherit the ranch in case that never happened."

Tillie sighed as she thought about her father. She wondered how he was doing. They had fought badly before she left, and the last words she had spoken to him had been ones of anger. She hoped that they would get a second chance when she got home, and that maybe he would see her as someone worthy of taking over his ranch, which was something she never thought she wanted.

"I thought women couldn't inherit things like

that," Tarak said.

She shrugged. "Men like my father have influence. If he wanted me to inherit, I could have. Of course, it would eventually be my husband's if I were to marry…" she trailed off. Tillie had been taught that her role was to be a wife her entire life. She'd been taught that she needed a husband to take care of her. But now, after surviving a raid and being on the road with the Apache, she was confident that she could care for herself.

"Your people have odd laws," Tarak muttered.

Tillie laughed loudly, drawing the attention of several of the men around her. "That is not something that I can argue."

Tillie didn't know much about the Apache women. There weren't any in their group. Elan

had told her that a second party of women and younger children had been sent ahead, so that they could get to their home quicker.

“I think that you would be very capable of running a ranch,” he told her. Tillie smiled at him. Tarak had been paying her small compliments over the last few days, ever since the night he had shown her how to play a few notes on his flute, and each time, her cheeks would flush from the happiness his words brought her.

“Thank you,” she said. “At least someone thinks so.”

Tillie and Tarak said nothing as they trotted closer and closer to the group. The two of them were catching up, which meant that the group was slowing down. Tillie assumed it must have been because they had encountered the rough patch of land that Tarak had warned them about.

“Spread out!” he yelled. “Watch the ground. We can’t afford to lose any of the horses.”

The group slowed even more as Tillie and Tarak caught up.

“You can ride with me if you are more comfortable,” Tarak said.

“What would happen to my horse?” she asked. Tillie had no intention of riding with Tarak. She had put her foot down when he had suggested it the first day they were back with the tribe.

“I could guide it through,” he said. “Horses are very intuitive.”

Tillie looked around at the men who were starting to tentatively cross the cacti. They had spread out to give themselves more room.

“I’ll be fine,” Tillie said. She shortened her reins so that she would have better control of her horse. “I’m a very good rider. You said so yourself.”

Tarak snorted, but he let her go. Tillie wasn’t worried about navigating the cacti. Her father’s ranch was riddled with the plants, much to his dismay, and Tillie had had more pricks from the plant than she could count.

Besides, riding with Tarak would bring unwanted attention to her, which was something she didn’t need any more of.

Tillie navigated her horse easily. The patches of bare land were wider than she had expected, and with the rest of the Apache spread out, she was able to navigate around the plants.

Tillie looked across the field. Elan and the boys were at the front, and she was glad to see that they were almost at the other side.

So, when a scream broke out, Tillie immediately searched the horizon to make sure that Elan and Tarak hadn't been harmed.

"Easy!" Tarak said. Tillie's unrest had made her horse anxious, but she was quickly able to get the horse back under control.
"What happened?" she asked. Her eyes searched around as she tried to figure out where the scream came from.

“Someone fell,” Tarak said. He jumped off his horse before Tillie could say anything and started quickly moving towards a man who had fallen from his animal. A small group was starting to gather around him.

“Get to the other side of the field,” Tarak ordered.

“What are you going to do?” Tillie asked.

Tarak didn’t say anything to her. Tillie didn’t take it personally. Tarak was back to being the second son of the Apache tribe. The sweet playfulness of him was gone, and instead, he was wholly focused on making sure that the man who had fallen was okay.

Tillie sighed. She wanted to help, but she didn’t want to be in the way. From her vantage point, it looked like the Apache men

were trying to get the screaming man up on his horse and out of the field. No doubt so that they could get the cacti spines from his body.

As Tillie got to the edge of the field, she immediately jumped off of her horse, her eyes wide as she watched several men bring the screaming Apache across. She was sure that he was in a great deal of pain. From what she could see, there were needles in his back, his arms, and his feet.

She winced as the men dropped him on his stomach in the dirt. They weren't as gentle as they should have been.

"Give him a piece of leather to bite on," Tarak said. "Get the healer, so he can start pulling these spines out."

One of the men placed a piece of leather in the

man's mouth, and Tillie squirmed slightly as she watched. She had never seen so many spines in one person. It was going to take hours to pull them out correctly, and then, he was going to have to get back into the saddle and ride on to wherever they decided to make camp. Tillie knew that the Apache were strong men, but she couldn't imagine the pain that such actions would cause, and as terrible as the thought was, she was glad that she was not the one injured, for once.

Tillie watched as a young man, who she had discovered was the healer of the tribe, walked over. He was much younger than Tillie would have thought for someone who was to have such an important job, but she wasn't going to question it.

She watched as the healer gabbed several of the spines and yanked them out with all of his might, causing the man to scream in pain, and Tillie's eyes to widen in shock.

“What are you doing?” she asked, rushing over to stop the healer from grabbing his next handful.

“This is of no concern to you,” Chalipun said. He was one of the men who had pulled the other from the field.

“It’s a concern to me that you are causing this man some sort of unnecessary pain,” she said.

The healer looked at her with disdain, and she knew that she couldn’t count on him to be an ally of hers any time soon. “I’ve healed many men in my life,” he said. “A great many more than you have.”

There was a snort from one of the men, but no one contradicted his assessment of things.

Tillie took a deep breath in an effort to calm the anger that was boiling up inside of her. If there was one thing she hated, it was being underestimated, which was exactly what this man was doing to her.

“I’m sure that you are a very good healer, but I have experience with this kind of thing,” she said. “And if you pull them out the way that you are, you are going to get the roots of the spine stuck into his skin. They’ll get infected, and the pain will be excruciating.”

The healer sneered at her.

“You heard the healer,” Chalipun said. “Back away.”

Tillie knew that she probably should just listen

to Chalipun. It was clear that looking at the men's faces, they didn't trust her or want her there. But the sound of the man's groan made Tillie stand her ground.

"If you just let me help, I promise that I can get the spines out and make sure that this man is in very little pain."

Chalipun walked towards her, and Tillie felt herself freezing in fear. She was sure that Chalipun would hurt her if he had the chance and that he would relish it. Luckily, Tarak jumped in front of him before he could get too close to her.

"Back away," he said.

"You would go against me for her?" Chalipun practically spit the words out as he spoke.

Tillie couldn't see Tarak's head, but she watched as his shoulders tensed. She wondered if he was going to back away and allow Chalipun to do whatever he cared to with her. She and Tarak had gotten closer, and she believed that he was a kind and honorable man, but she still wondered if he would choose her over an Apache.

The man on the ground released a low, loud groan, and Tillie's heart went out to him. She could only imagine the pain that he was in.

"I want the same thing you do, which is to make sure that Bipin gets those spines out so that we can continue onward and get home," Tarak said. There was a hardness to his voice that Tillie hadn't heard before. Even when he had talked to her with hatred, there had been emotion in it.

“You aren’t going to allow a silly girl to harm one of our men, are you?” the healer asked.

Tillie turned to look at Taza, who had come to join their small group. The easy smile that he often had on his face was gone, and instead, his strong jaw looked as though it had been carved out of stone.

“Can you get those out of him safely?” Taza asked. He nodded to the man who still had his face in the dirt.

“I can,” Tillie said. She was confident that she could do a better job than the healer. Even as she looked at the space where he had pulled the spines, she could still see the bottoms of them just underneath the man’s skin.

“Then, do it,” Taza said.

That was all that Tillie needed, and apparently, it was all that most of the men needed as well. Even the healer, who clearly wanted to argue, moved out of her way.

Most of the men around her were going to hate her for this, but Tillie didn't care. She had the chance to help someone, and she was going to take it. Consequences be damned.

Chapter 18

“Give me something for his head,” Tillie ordered. Tarak’s eyes widened in shock. He had never seen Tillie like this. There was almost a single-mindedness to her actions, which he found impressive.

Tarak didn’t want to move from his spot. Chalipun still looked as though he wanted nothing more than to skin her alive with the large knife at his hip.

“Here,” Taza said. “Use this.” He handed Tillie one of their saddlebags.

“I’m going to place this under your head,” she said to Bipin. She gently lifted his head up before placing the saddlebag under it. Tarak

had to admit that it was a good idea to keep Bipin from getting a mouth full of dirt.

Bipin groaned. “I know you are in pain,” Tillie said. Her voice was soft as she spoke to Bipin. “We are going to fix it.”

Tarak watched Tillie with bated breath. She might not know it, but she needed to prove herself at that moment. If she didn’t, she would hurt Taza’s standing as chief. He had gone against one of his own tribesmen for a white woman, and if she harmed Bipin, the men would never forgive Taza or Tarak.

“It’s going to be okay,” Tillie said. Taza watched as she pressed on the skin where the healer had pulled out the spines. It was red and angry, and as she pressed on it, Tarak was surprised to see small pieces of the spines make their way out of Bipin’s skin.

“There we go,” she said. She worked on the area, making sure that all of the leftover spines were gone before she moved on to the ones that were still stuck in his skin.

“You have to pull the spines out individually,” Tillie said. Tarak didn’t know who she was addressing, but she spoke as she worked, letting the men, and Bipin, know what she was doing every step of the way. “If you don’t, you’ll leave part of the spine in the skin.”

Tillie continued working, pulling piece by piece out of Bipin’s skin. Bipin groaned as she worked, but he stayed much more still than he had when the healer had yanked the spines out of his skin.

The process took a great deal of time, but Tarak could see what Tillie meant about going slow. He could see when looking at Bipin’s skin, that Tillie was getting out all of the

pieces of the spine.

The hot sun was beating down on all of them.

“There!” Tillie exclaimed as she got the last spine out from Bipin’s skin. “That should do it.”

Bipin released another groan, but this time, it was one of relief.

“We should probably clean the wounds,” she said. “Do you have any whiskey?”

Tarak shook his head.

“The Apache don’t drink the white men’s

water," Chalipun said.

"We need to get moving," Taza interrupted. Everyone was impressed by the work that Tillie had done, but Tarak knew that none of them would admit it. What they did do was ignore Chalipun. "Can he move?"

Tillie looked down at Bipin. Her small hand went towards his head. "Bipin?" she asked. "Do you think that you can stand?"

Bipin said nothing, and Tarak felt his heart sink. He hoped that Tillie had not done any accidental damage.

"Can we at least give him some water?" she asked. Her eyes were wide as she spoke. It was clear to anyone who was looking at her that she was concerned. It was just more proof to Tarak that Tillie was not like the rest of her

people. She was kind and selfless.

“Here,” Tarak said. He reached for his water skin and handed it to Tillie. She immediately unscrewed it and placed the rim of it at Bipin’s lips. Bipin allowed the water to drip over his lips before he swallowed it.

They all waited to see what would happen next. Finally, Bipin began talking. “Help me up,” he said. His voice was weak, probably from the screaming that he did, but his eyes looked alert.

“Easy!” Tillie said as they pulled Bipin to his feet. “His skin is probably still very sensitive.”

“She’s not lying about that,” Bipin said. When he got on his feet, Tarak could see the pain that was clearly visible on his face. “But I feel a lot better now that those spines are gone.”

Tarak looked back at Tillie. She smiled slightly at him. “You’ll want to keep your skin covered,” she said. “Those little pinpricks will smart even worse if they spend too long in the sun.”

“I can make a paste to protect your skin from some of the herbs I’ve been collecting,” the healer said. Tarak wanted to remind the healer that he hadn’t offered anything to Tillie, even as her skin burned in the first few days of their journey, but he kept his mouth closed.

There was already too much infighting amongst the tribe, and Tarak knew that they would have to do everything that they could to try and keep the peace until they returned home.

“I think I’ll be fine,” Bipin said. There was a

hardness to his voice that Tarak hadn't expected. "Tillie here did a good job fixing my back."

Chalipun and the healer both looked at Tillie with violence in their eyes, and Tarak felt his stomach drop to his feet. He hadn't had the hope that his men would accept Tillie in any way, but he thought that they would be able to coexist until they were able to get her home. Now, he was worried that she and Taza had made another enemy.

"You should take the healer up on his offer," Tillie said, her voice bright. "We don't' want any of those wounds getting infected."

Bipin nodded. When he turned to look at her, there was a smile on his face, which Tarak thought was almost as shocking as the visible hate on the healer's. Bipin turned his attention to the healer. "You can fix me up when we make camp. I'll keep myself covered until

then.”

The healer said nothing, but he nodded in agreement.

“Good,” Taza said. “We’re losing more daylight. We need to get to a safe place to make camp unless we want to be back in coyote country.” Taza turned to look at Bipin. “Can you ride?”

Bipin looked as though one strong wind would fell him. He was an older man who probably should have been back at the camp. He’d insisted on coming along with the rest of the men when they traveled north.

“If my horse is able to ride, then I am,” Bipin said. His horse was fine, but Tarak worried that in their haste to try and get to a good camp, they might be pushing Bipin harder

than he could handle.

“Then, we ride,” Taza said. “Gather the rest of the men. Make sure that everyone is ready to go.”

Chalipun and the remainder of the men who were surrounding them nodded. They had been given an order by their chief, and they would follow through. Tarak was glad. All of the attention was starting to make his skin crawl. He didn’t trust Chalipun, but he didn’t think that any of the other men would go against their chief and harm Tillie.

Tillie also walked towards her horse. Tarak wanted to talk to her, but he knew that he needed to be careful with how he interacted with her. The men weren’t happy, and he didn’t need to give them another reason to hate her.

“Tillie?” Bipin’s voice called out.

Everyone froze, anxious to see what Bipin would say.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You don’t have to thank me,” she said. “I did what anyone would.”

Bipin nodded. “All the same,” he told her. “You helped me, and I won’t forget it any time soon. Maybe none of us should.”

Bipin’s words might not have had much effect, but Tarak knew that Tillie had made an ally.

One is better than none, Tarak thought.

Chapter 19

Tillie was exhausted, yet invigorated. Her day had been a day like no other. She had been able to help a man using her knowledge, and it had been the first time in a long time that she had felt useful.

Her actions also caused her to make new friends and new enemies. As they rode to camp, she felt the pinpricks of Chalipun and the healer's stares on the back of her neck. She tried her best not to let it bother her.

Bipin was riding next to her. He said it was because he wished to thank her, but she also suspected that it had to do with him being in too much pain to ride with the other men. Tillie didn't mind. Bipin was nice, and it was lovely to have someone to talk to who wasn't Tarak or Elan.

“How are you feeling?” she asked. They had finally stopped after several more hours of riding. Luckily, the remainder of the ride had been flat and easy to navigate. Tillie was just as grateful as she imagined Bipin to be.

“I’m better,” the older man said. “It’s nice to have my feet on stable ground.”

Tillie smiled at him. Bipin was maybe a decade or two older than Tarak. His dark hair was peppered with grays, and his eyes had small crevices at the edges, belying his age. Tillie suspected that he was one of the oldest men in their group.

“I can imagine,” Tillie said. “I don’t think that I’ve ever seen so many spines in one person.”

Bipin laughed. Tillie was learning that he was a good-spirited man, unlike some of the other Apache, who always seemed dour and serious. He was a quiet man, but there was a kindness in his eyes that reminded Tillie of Henry. Whenever she looked at him, she felt a sense of peace, as well as a sense of sadness as she thought of her deceased friends.

“Lucky for me, you were traveling with us,” he said. “If not, I might not be able to walk right now.”

Tillie hid her face in embarrassment. She knew that the healer was angry with her, but she was proud of herself.

“I’ve had a few run-ins with those plants. When I was a girl, one of my friends dared me to try and pull one out by the roots.” She shivered as she remembered the pain of such a dare. At the time, it hadn’t seemed so silly.

She wanted to prove that she was just as useful as a boy. All that had gotten her was a bunch of spines in the hand and a grounding by her governess.

Bipin chuckled. “You remind me of my daughter. She has a habit of getting herself into trouble.”

The compliment made Tillie’s cheeks turn redder. She wished that she had a father who seemed so kind and caring as Bipin did. He’d only talked about his daughter for a moment, but she could see the sparkle in his eyes.

“Was your daughter with the other party?” she asked. She rolled out her mat. She wanted nothing more than to place it next to the warm fire, but she suspected that she needed to try and keep a low profile. Chalipun had made it clear, more than once, that he was interested in her, and not, necessarily, in a good way.

“No,” Bipin said. “She’s with child, so she’s back home.”

Tillie smiled. “That’s exciting. I’m sure that you can’t wait to get back home. Do you know when the baby is due to come?”

Bipin looked at her oddly. “I suspect that he’ll come right before the harvest,” he said.

Tillie wanted to ask why Bipin thought that his grandchild was going to be a boy, but she didn’t want to offend him.

“You should move closer to the fire,” Bipin said. “It’s going to be cold tonight. Hot days always bring icy nights in the desert.”

Tillie had learned that over the last few days. She had been happy to be close to the fire, enjoying its warmth, but tonight, she thought better of it, especially as she looked and saw both Chalipun and the healer looking at her.

“I think it’s best to stay away for tonight,” she said.

Bipin’s eyes followed hers. “You shouldn’t worry about those two. They’ll spout a lot of nonsense, but they wouldn’t go against Taza. The chief has declared you to be our guest.”

Tillie didn’t know much about the Apache ways. She was learning their ways slowly, and she knew that there was some truth in what Bipin was saying. She also couldn’t stop the fear that slithered down her spine whenever Chalipun’s eyes met her.

He wanted to harm her. Of that, she was sure.

“I’m not sure if that’s true,” Tillie said. “Chalipun seems to have a lot of influence over the men.”

“They are simply scared of you,” he told her.

Tillie sighed. “You aren’t the first person who’s told me that,” she said. She knew that fear made people do odd things, but she was tired of doing everything that she could to try and prove herself a friend of the Apache people, only for them to look at her with such distrust.

“You should go and find Tarak,” Bipin said.

Tillie looked at Bipin. “I thought you said I have nothing to fear,” she told him.

Bipin laughed. It was a hearty one that couldn’t stop a smile from overtaking her face. “You don’t,” he said. “But he’ll make sure that you have a space by the fire.”

Tillie laughed. She reached out before she could stop herself and placed her hand on Bipin’s arm. “You should let the healer help you,” she told him again. “And get some rest.”

Bipin nodded, and Tillie began to hunt for Tarak. She didn’t see him around the camp, and she suspected that he had found a quiet place to play his music. She smiled as she strayed away from the camp.

Of all the things Tillie had considered Tarak would be, she hadn’t thought one of those

things would be a marvelous flute player.

As she moved further away from the camp, and the loud voices of the men started growing more faint, she heard the soft sounds of Tarak's flute. He was further away than he had been the last time she had heard him playing and a part of Tillie was worried that without the protection of the firelight, they would be in danger.

She shook that fear away and walked closer into where Tarak was playing. He was bathed in moonlight, and she couldn't stop herself from thinking how handsome he looked.

Tillie walked into the clearing, enjoying the calming sounds of the flute. Tarak played the flute beautifully until he spotted Tillie standing slightly behind him.

“I’m sorry!” she said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your playing.”

In fact, Tillie wanted nothing more than for him to keep playing. The sound of his flute provided her with a peace she hadn’t felt in her entire life. Even when she was in her father’s home, warm and protected, she hadn’t truly felt at peace. There’d been grief and anger in those walls, and it wasn’t until recently that she realized how much of that had kept her from truly being happy.

“I’m sorry,” Tarak said. “I should have checked on you before coming out here.”

Tillie snorted. “You aren’t my keeper,” she said. “There’s nothing for you to apologize for.”

“I come out here when I need to clear my

head," he told her.

"You needed to clear your head today?" she asked.

Today hadn't even been the worst day of the journey. Sure, Bipin falling into the cacti hadn't been great, but considering she'd almost been eaten by a coyote, Tillie didn't think that some cactus spines compared.

But as Tillie looked closely at Tarak, she couldn't ignore the darkness under his eyes and the hollowness of his cheeks. He didn't look ill, but it looked as though he hadn't been sleeping well.

"Are you alright?" she asked. Tillie walked forward. It felt as though an invisible string was pulling her towards him. Before she could stop herself, she pressed her fingers against

the shadows of his cheeks.

Tarak grabbed his fingers. “Come here,” he said. The warmth of his fingers permeated her skin as he led her to the edge of a large rock. “Sit,” he said.

She did as he said. She didn’t know what Tarak was doing, but she enjoyed the feeling of his skin on her own.

“The stars out here are so bright,” Tillie said. “I don’t think that I really ever looked at them before.”

Tillie didn’t think that she had ever stopped to look at the stars on her dad’s ranch. When she was there, she was normally tucked away in bed by now.

“My people believe that when one dies, they return to the sky,” Tarak told her. He had taken a seat next to her, and they were so close that she could feel the warmth of his breath against the side of her ear. It made her shiver and press her body slightly harder against his.

“That’s beautiful,” she said. “I would like to think that my mother is a star, watching down on me. My baby brother too.” Usually, when she talked about her mother, Tillie felt herself getting choked up with emotion. It had always been so difficult for her. Looking back, she wondered if it was her that struggled, or her father.

“The Apache believe that our ancestors never leave us,” he said. He was still holding her hand, and he gave her fingers a small squeeze as he spoke. “I always think of my father as part of the air. I swear that I can feel him in the breeze that tickles my skin.”

Tillie said nothing. No words were necessary as they sat under the stars sharing in their grief.

“My people believe that our dead go somewhere…else…” Tillie said. She didn’t quite know how to describe God and Heaven to a man who didn’t believe in either. “Your loved ones never leave you, though. They live inside of you.” She pressed her free hand to her heart.

Tarak said nothing. He’d turned his head to see her, and his dark eyes bore into her own. “I think that’s a nice sentiment as well.”

“Sometimes, I still can’t believe that Henry and James are dead,” Tillie said. It was the first time that she had spoken about them since that first night. “James’s and his wife had a baby. He’ll grow up not knowing his

father.”

“He’ll know him,” Tarak said. “He’ll feel him every day in the Earth, and he will see him in the stars. His soul will guide him as he goes through life.”

Tarak’s words were fierce, almost as if he were trying to believe them himself. Tears filled Tillie’s eyes as she thought about James and Henry. She prayed that they had ended up somewhere good, whether it be in the heavens as a star or an angel.

“Thank you,” she said. Her voice was thick with emotion.

Tarak said nothing, but his free hand came up to her chin to wipe away the tracks of tears that she hadn’t even realized had started to fall.

Their eye locked, and despite her grief, she wanted nothing more than for him to kiss her. Tarak's eyes went to her lips, and Tillie instinctively knew that he was thinking the same thing.

Still, she wasn't totally prepared for it when he pressed his lips against her own in a light, delicate kiss.

Chapter 20

Tarak didn't know what he was thinking. There was something about sitting with Tillie in the moonlight, sharing in their grief, that made him lose his better judgment. That was the only thing that would explain why he had decided to kiss her.

Tarak's hands wrapped into Tillie's hair, which had come undone from the low braid it had been tied back in. The strands were as soft as silk as they fell across his fingers. Tillie pulled away slightly, the moonlight illuminating her skin so that it looked paler than normal.

"Why did you do that?" she asked. Her lips were pink from the pressure of their kiss, and her cheeks were flushed. Tarak didn't think that she had ever looked more beautiful to him.

“I wanted to,” he told her. His voice was huskier than usual. Tarak wanted to kiss her again, but he felt as though the moment had passed between the two of them. Instead, he reached out and placed one of her stray curls behind her ear.

“I’m sorry if I did something out of turn,” he said. Tarak wasn’t really sorry. That kiss had made him feel more alive than he had in years.

Tillie said nothing, which made Tarak worried that she hadn’t liked the kiss that they shared. Before he could ask again, he heard the sharp sound of a twig cracking, signaling someone’s approach.

Tarak immediately jumped up from his spot next to her partially because he was worried

about who might come upon them, and also, because he didn't want to be seen so close to Tillie. He knew that the men wouldn't understand why he was so transfixed by Tillie.

"Tarak?" Taza's voice called out.

Tarak felt himself instantly relax when he saw that it was only his brother walking towards them.

"What are you doing out here?" Taza asked. His voice was emotionless, and Tarak instantly knew that something was wrong.

"What are you doing?" Tarak asked. It wasn't like his brother to be away from camp. Taza thrived on being at the center of the tribe in a way that Tarak didn't. That was why Tarak often slipped away to try and clear his head.

“Looking for you two,” Taza said. His eyes were trained on Tillie, whose cheeks and lips were flushed.

“I should get back to camp,” Tillie said. She stood up from her perch and shook out the skirt of her dress. Tarak was starting to realize that that was something that she did when she was nervous about things.

“I’ll take you,” Tarak said. “It’s dark, and you shouldn’t be walking alone.”

Tillie opened her mouth to argue with him, but Taza spoke before she could.

“She’ll be fine,” Taza said. “She walked here in the dark, after all.”

Tarak was surprised by his brother's words. Taza made it clear that he wanted Tillie to feel like a welcome guest amongst their tribe, and now, he was speaking to her with a harsh tone that he normally reserved for Chalipun.

Tillie said nothing as she brushed past Tarak. She gave him a wide berth as she skirted around him, but they were close enough that he could smell the lavender that always seemed to permeate from her skin.

"You should wipe that look off of your face before you go back to camp," Taza said once Tillie was far enough away from the two of them to not hear their conversation.

"What?" he asked. He had been watching Tillie to make sure that she got back safely that he was sure that he had misheard his brother's question.

“You look lovesick. Like a young boy who has seen a beautiful woman for the first time,” Taza said. This time there was no mistaking the anger in his voice as he spoke.

“What are you talking about?” Tarak asked. “I’m simply being friendly to Tillie, looking out for her, which is what you asked me to do.”

Taza released a small snort and shook his head. The anger in his voice didn’t go away. “Don’t lie to me,” he said. “I saw the two of you.”

Tarak felt his heart fall to his feet. He hadn’t been paying a great deal of attention to his surroundings. First, because he had become lost in the music, but then, because he had been lost in Tillie. He hadn’t expected that

anyone would come looking for the two of them. He'd been careless, and from the look on Taza's face, he was going to make him pay for that carelessness.

"What were you thinking?" Taza sneered. He walked towards Tarak looking every bit the Apache chief as the moonlight played across his face casting shadows against his stiff jaw.

"I don't want to talk about this with you," Tarak said. He started walking past his brother. Taza thought that he could intimidate Tarak, but Tarak wasn't so easily cowed.

Unfortunately for Tarak, neither was Taza. He reached out and grabbed Tarak by the upper arm. "That girl has brought enough problems to this tribe without you getting involved with her."

Tarak snorted and jerked his arm from his brother's grasp. Taza's grip was tight enough to stop him in his tracks, but not so tight that Tarak couldn't easily escape him. He hated that his brother was treating him like he was a small child while ignoring all the different ways he was wrong.

"That's rich coming from you," Tarak said. "You were the one who insisted on making sure that she got home safely."

"Yes," Taza said. "I wanted to make sure that she was returned to her home, not kiss her."

Tarak closed his eyes. He had hoped that his brother had simply seen the two of them sitting closely with one another, but it seemed that he had seen a lot more than that. Tarak had no intention of explaining himself. Partly because he didn't know what to say. He felt something for Tillie that he didn't want to feel and that he couldn't explain.

“You can’t allow yourself to get involved with her in any sort of romantic way,” Taza said.

Tarak said nothing. He wasn’t interested in pouring his heart out to Taza. He wouldn’t understand even if Tarak did tell him about the connection that he felt with Tillie. Taza would never understand. He wanted to use Tillie, which was the only reason that he was allowing her to ride with them.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion,” Tarak told his brother. He started walking back towards the camp, leaving his brother in the clearing.

“She’s going back to her nice home to marry some rich man, and you are returning with us. Tillie is kind enough, but there is no future for you and her,” Taza said.

Tarak hadn't thought about having a future with Tillie, but his brother's words stopped him in his tracks. "I thought you wanted her people and ours to have a future filled with peace?" Tarak asked.

Taza sneered. "You know that those two things aren't the same. Her people barely accept us as it is. They aren't going to accept something between the two of you. You could ruin everything that I hope to build."

"That's what you are really angry about, aren't you?" Tarak said. "You are worried that something between Tillie and I would ruin your plan."

"I'm worried that you will end up doing something that you can't take back," Taza said.

Tarak shook his head. His brother was lying to him. He was worried that if Tarak did something untoward to Tillie, or something that her father might not like, that it would ruin his plans to use her to broker some sort of peace.

“I shouldn’t be the one that you are worried about,” Tarak told his brother.

Taza sighed and ran a hand through his hair. It was clear that he was trying to contain his frustration. “I will keep Tillie away from you. She’s a young woman with her first taste of freedom….”

Tarak cut his brother off before he could say anything else. He worried that if his brother spoke, he would say something that would anger Tarak in a way that made him unable to hold onto the little self-control that he had.

“It’s not Tillie who you should be worried about,” Tarak said. He wanted to add that Tillie wasn’t some silly thing who didn’t know her own mind, but he knew there was no use in saying any of that. Tarak wouldn’t listen to him anyway. “You need to be more concerned about Chalipun.”

Taza released another heavy sigh. “Chalipun is nothing more than a nuisance,” he said. “But he will die down. Knowing about you and Tillie won’t help.”

Tarak shook his head. “You aren’t listening,” he said. He was growing more and more frustrated with his brother. Taza was single-minded in his pursuit of peace, which was something that Tarak could respect. Still, that single-mindedness was keeping him from seeing the truth, and it was only a matter of time before that cost them all.

Tarak was not going to allow Tillie to bear the brunt for his brother's inability to think clearly.

"I am listening," he said. "I know that Chalipun has said thing—"

"He thinks Tillie is a portent of doom," Tarak said. "He hates her."

"He hates all of her people," Taza said. "But he'll never act on it. We are family. He wouldn't go against me in that way."

"Is that why you refuse to listen to reason?" Tarak asked. "Because Chalipun is family?"

Taza closed his eyes. As the moon shifted in the sky and the glow of it illuminated his brother's face, Tarak was starting to wonder if his brother was as oblivious as he thought. Signs of stress were starting to mar his face.

"Chalipun is family," Taza said. "And while I might be able to ignore that idiot healer for Tillie, doing something to Chalipun in retribution of a white woman…" he trailed off, and Tarak immediately knew what his brother wasn't saying.

Tarak hated that he felt sympathy for his brother, especially after the way he had acted towards him just moments ago, but he did. Once more, Tarak was reminded that being chief of their tribe wasn't easy, especially in situations like the one they faced now.

Taza reached out and placed a hand on Tarak's shoulder. It was what he did when he wanted his brother to understand something.

It was his way of forming a connection, even when Tarak didn't want to feel one.

"I know that you've grown to care about Tillie," he said.

"Don't start," Tarak said. He went to pull away, but Taza's fingers dug slightly into his shoulder, stopping him.

"You think I've just buried my head in the sand about Chalipun, but I'm not stupid. I know that Chalipun's anger and hatred are dangerous. But there's nothing I can do about it." Taza's words were sharp and penetrating.

"I'll take care of it," Tarak said. "Tillie had done nothing to anyone. You've promised her safe passage, and that is what she is going to get."

“You need to be careful,” Taza said, cautioning Tarak once more. “You too, can’t do anything against Chalipun. If you do, it’ll make things worse.”

Tarak didn’t want to agree with his brother, but he couldn’t ignore how easily Chalipun had been able to gain supporters this afternoon. Tillie had helped Bipin, and in doing so, she had made enemies of the healer and the other men who saw her as just another one of her people who wanted to destroy the ways of the Apache.

“Fine,” Tarak said. “But I’m keeping a watchful eye on our cousin. For all of our sakes.”

From the look on Taza’s face, Tarak was sure that his brother understood exactly what he was saying.

Chapter 21

Tillie couldn't stop thinking about the feeling of Tarak's lips on her own. They had been softer than she had expected, and the feeling of his warm hands on her hips made her blush. Even though it was mid-afternoon, Tillie was sure that she could feel his fingertips pressing into her hips.

She was sure that her cheeks were pink with heat as she thought about it.

"Are you alright?" Tarak asked.

They hadn't said more than a handful of words to one another since last night, but he had ridden close to her that morning, and his presence continued to remind her of the way

he had made her feel the night before.

“Just warm from the sun,” she said. The aloe she had found previously had soothed her skin, and the skin was no longer inflamed. It had also stopped being so sensitive to the sun. She suspected that was more because Tarak had given her a light paste to smooth on her skin than anything else.

“Do you need to stop?” he asked, his voice concerned.

Tillie shook her head. She did need to stop. She had barely slept a wink the night before, and the combination of the slower pace and the summer heat was starting to put her to sleep. But if she stopped, she was certain that she would never hear the end of it from most of the other men.

“Are you sure?” Tarak asked.

Tillie laughed. “I promise that I’m fine,” she said. “I’m not nearly as fragile as I appear.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” he said.

Tillie smiled at his words. Though she couldn’t stop thinking about last night, their kiss, she also just couldn’t stop thinking about Tarak. He was a good man. Even when he hadn’t liked her, he had made sure that she had everything that she needed. He had taken care of her, and she appreciated it more than she was able to say to him.

Tarak’s horse was so close that she could practically feel the brush of his horse against her leg.

“How many more days do we have?” Tillie asked.

“What?” Tarak asked. It was clear that he was surprised by her question.

“How many more days do we have on the road?’ she asked him. Though they had been traveling for almost a full week, Tillie’s body felt as though it had been months. She wasn’t excited to go home to her father. She didn’t want to face her friends’ families and explain how she had left them out in the desert, but Tillie would be glad to be off the road. She wanted nothing more than a hot bath and a soft bed.

Tarak gave her an odd look. “A week,” he said. “Maybe, a little less.”

Tillie sighed. She didn't know if a week made her happy or if she wanted more time with Tarak and the Apache.

"I'm sure that you want to be home with your family," Tarak said. There was a strange tone to his voice that Tillie couldn't quite place.

"I'm not sure how I feel about going home," she said, honestly.

Tarak's brow rose. Once more, they were at the end of the tribe riding slower than even the boys. Tillie had wanted time to think, and her exhaustion made her even slower than normal. She hadn't expected that Tarak was going to ride so slowly with her.

"Why's that?" he asked her.

Tillie had told Tarak a bit about her father. She felt that most of what she had said painted him in a bad light, which she hadn't wanted to do. Her father wasn't a bad man. He'd taken care of her as best as he could, but the thought of giving up the freedom that she had found with the Apache was making it difficult to desire to go home.

"I don't know how my father is going to react," she said, trying to be diplomatic in her speaking.

"Because you've been with the Apache?" he asked.

Tillie snorted at that. "No," she said. "I have a pretty good idea of how he is going to feel about that."

Tarak said nothing. Tillie suspected that unlike Taza, Tarak had a more realistic view of how her father might react when he learned that his daughter had been traveling with the Apache for the last few weeks.

“Then, why don’t you want to go home?” he asked.

Tillie’s horse let out a loud neigh, and Tillie started laughing. She patted her neck. “It’s okay, girl,” she said. The first thing that Tillie had learned about horses—they could pick up on your emotions.

“My father wants me to marry,” she said. “I’m not sure that a band of men trying to kill me and steal my fortune is going to make his desire any less.”

Tillie’s horse reared up slightly, causing Tarak

and Tillie to stop their conversation and pay attention to the animal.

“Steady, girl,” she said. She reached out and pulled the reins a little tighter, trying to get better control over the animal. This was her horse, after all. It was one of the only things that she had been able to keep from her old life. “I think the heat might be getting to her,” she said. Tillie had no other explanation for why her horse would be acting so wild. She was normally a very docile horse, and Tillie had been impressed with how she had handled the ride.

“After everything, you don’t think that your father would still send you away, do you?” Tarak asked.

Tillie snorted. Her father loved her, but he always saw her as a way to make more money. Tillie hadn’t realized that until the night before her journey, when she had begged her

father not to send her away.

“Who knows,” Tillie said. “I used to think that I knew my father better than anyone, but I realized that I was wrong.”

Before Tillie could say more, her horse started shaking her head side to side. Tillie pulled the reins tighter. She looked down at the ground trying to figure out what was going on. Her horse had grown up on a ranch, so she was used to critters, and nothing had ever scared her before.

“Easy girl,” Tillie said. “There’s nothing there for you to be scared of.” Her horse didn’t listen though, and kept jerking its head back and forth.

“Is everything okay?” Tarak asked. He rode in front of her, and she knew that he was trying

to get ahead of her horse in case things got worse. Tillie was sure that everything would be fine.

“She must be spooked about something,” she said. She didn’t care to be a damsel in distress. She was sure that she could handle whatever was going on. She’d been riding since she was old enough to walk.

A circle was starting to form around the two of them, and Tillie felt her cheeks darkening as she tried to get her horse in order.

“Get off the horse,” Tarak told her. His voice was calm as he spoke, but Tillie recognized the tone. He was trying to appear nonchalant. Tillie was starting to suspect that it was because she was in some real danger.

Normally, Tillie would argue, but her horse’s

erratic behavior made her heart thunder in her chest. She was still recovering from being thrown a few days ago. Her body hadn't even healed yet, and she was sure that she could not handle getting thrown off again.

She started to dismount, and as she did, the horse started to rear up, and Tillie had to keep her fingers wrapped tightly around her the reins to try and hang on.

"Tillie!" Tarak yelled. He had jumped off his horse so quickly that Tillie barely realized that he was back on the ground.

"It's fine," Tillie shouted. She worried that if Tarak came closer than her horse was going to get more and more rowdy. She was already holding on for everything that she had. "I can't get back on."

“You need to get off,” Tarak said. “Get off now.”

Just as Tarak spoke, Tillie’s horse reared up and began shaking its head and tossing Tillie around. Her hands were starting to sweat, and she knew that she couldn’t keep holding on for much longer.

Her fingers became slick, and before she knew it, she was being thrown from her bucking horse. Tillie screamed as she felt herself being thrown through the air. She expected to land on the hard ground, but that never came.

Instead, she heard a small ‘umph’ as she fell into Tarak’s arms. “I’ve got you,” he said, his voice warm in her ears.

Tillie allowed herself a moment to enjoy the warmth of Tarak’s arms. Her heart was racing,

and she wasn't sure if it was from fear or desire. She had never been so close to a man, and she could smell Tarak's unique scent of cloves and sage. It made her heart hammer in her chest.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Before Tillie could say anything, Tarak placed her on her feet and started looking over her. Tillie knew that he was simply checking for injuries, but as she felt his fingers skimming over her, she couldn't stop the heat that formed within her chest.

"I'm fine," she said. Her cheeks were blazing with embarrassment as several of the Apache men started looking at her.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Tillie nodded. Her horse was still bucking and squirming. Luckily, several of the boys had grabbed her and were doing their best to keep her calm. “Be careful!” Tillie shouted. She would hate for one of the boys to get hurt. She didn’t know what had gotten into her horse, but she wasn’t acting like her normal, docile self.

“See,” a deep voice boomed, “another accident! And look who is at the center of it.” Chalipun walked into the circle, and Tillie suppressed a groan. She hadn’t seen Chalipun much since the other night, and she preferred to keep their interactions to an absolute minimum.

“People get bucked off of horses all the time,” Tillie reminded him. “I’m sure I’m not the first. If I recall, there was an accident with a horse just yesterday.”

Chalipun scowled at her. Several of the men were whispering, and Tillie wondered if they too were making ridiculous claims.

“I’ve ridden on many campaigns, and we’ve never had this many accidents,” the man who had been the healer said.

Tillie stiffened.

“You’ve been on a handful,” Tarak said. “And as Tillie mentioned, there are always accidents. It’s why we travel with a healer.”

Tillie bit her lip to suppress a smirk. Tarak’s voice was devoid of emotion, but he made some very strong points about things.

“Plus,” he said. “It helps that the horse was fed wild berries.”

Tillie scrunched her nose in confusion as the men tittered. “Wild berries?” she asked. “I wouldn’t feed the horse berries.” Her horse didn’t even like berries. She was surprised that she would eat them.

“There’s red residue on her mouth,” he said. “And the berries in these parts cause hallucinations.”

Tillie sucked in a small breath. She could hear the implication in his voice, and she knew what he was implying.

“Someone fed your horse those berries because they wanted you hurt,” Tarak said.

Tillie felt fear starting to fill her. Someone was trying to kill her, and it was only through pure luck that they had failed.

Looking around at the Apache men who were staring at her with wide, dark eyes, she was starting to realize that any one of them might be out to kill her, and she couldn't understand why.

Chapter 22

Tarak was angry. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt the red, hot rage that was boiling in his chest. It was almost impossible for him to control, but somehow, he managed to do it. He managed to bite his tongue, almost hard enough to draw blood, until they had stopped for a rest.

"Are you sure that you are alright?" he asked Tillie. She was riding with him. When he had insisted that she had to ride with him, many of the men had given him odd looks. It was clear that they thought it was odd that he wanted Tillie to ride with him, especially when she appeared perfectly fine, but Tarak didn't want her being alone.

"I'm fine," she said. "I could have ridden by myself."

Tarak shrugged slightly. “I didn’t trust that your horse wouldn’t throw you again,” he said. “And we don’t have any extras.”

It was the same excuse that he had given to his brother and the men, and it had made sense at the time. But Tarak couldn’t ignore the way it felt to hold Tillie so close to him. Her scent invaded his entire being. She was the only thing keeping him from going towards Chalipun and making it clear that he knew what he had done.

“I need to stretch my legs,” Tillie said, breaking into his thoughts.

Tarak looked around. Everyone was starting to dismount from their horses and taking sips of their water skins.

“I’ll dismount first,” Tarak said. He got off of his horse before Tillie could even speak.

“Show off,” she muttered.

Tarak laughed. Despite everything that she had gone through, Tillie had still somehow remained good-natured.

“Here,” Tarak said. He reached out a hand towards her. “I can help you get down.”

Tillie waved off his hand. “I’m perfectly capable of getting down on my own,” she said.

Tarak laughed. Tillie was a strong-willed woman, and if she was determined to get off

the horse on her own, then she was going to do just that. Tarak felt his chest constricting with fear as he watched her dismount. Tillie continued to tell him that she was fine, but he couldn't get the view of her hanging onto the horse for all she was worth out of his mind. He was sure that if he had been unable to catch her that she might have broken her neck.

The thought caused bile to rise in Tarak's throat. He couldn't think about her being harmed in any way.

"See," Tillie said. She raised her hands in mock triumph as her boots hit the ground. Her golden hair glistened in the sun, and her rosy cheeks were red from the sun and the exertion, and Tarak felt his breath stolen away from her beauty. "I told you that I could get down on my own."

"You did," Tarak admitted.

Tillie's smile faded slightly, and Tarak looked behind him. He felt himself stiffen as he saw Chalipun walking over to them. Tarak felt his hands starting to turn into fists before he could stop himself.

"What do you want?" Tillie asked. She placed her hands on her hips, and Tarak was impressed to see her ready square off with Chalipun. He suspected that Chalipun had poisoned Tillie's horse, and so Tarak wanted to keep the two of them as far away from one another as possible.

"I want you gone," Chalipun said.

Tarak stepped in between the two of them, shielding Tillie from Chalipun's presence. "What do you need?" he asked, his voice gruff as he tried his best to tamp down his anger. He could feel it bubbling up to the surface,

and this was not the best place for Tarak to allow it to explode.

“We need to put that horse down,” Chalipun said. “It is slowing us down.”

“What?” Tarak asked. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting Chalipun to say, but it hadn’t been that.

“You aren’t putting my horse down,” Tillie said. She raced forward past Tarak, who stifled a groan.

“That’s not for you to decide,” Chalipun sneered. “That horse of yours is dangerous and slowing us down.”

“She’s a good horse!” Tillie shouted.

“She’s a menace,” Chalipun sneered.

Tarak knew his cousin well enough to know that he was enjoying getting Tillie all riled up. He wanted to antagonize Tillie. Tarak wasn’t sure if it was just hatred that made him do the things he was doing, or if it was something else. He didn’t care. He wanted Chalipun and Tillie away from one another. They were starting to gather stares, and that was something that Tarak wanted to avoid.

“You’re the menace!” Tillie yelled.

Tarak groaned internally. A small group was starting to gather around them, and Tarak knew that Tillie’s outburst was not going to help her make friends. The tribe was already divided, and they couldn’t afford to sow further division.

“Watch yourself, girl,” Chalipun said.

“Leave it alone,” Tarak said. He didn’t know who he was talking to, but he wanted both of them to stop making things between the two of them worse.

“The ancestors don’t want you here,” Chalipun said. “They keep warning us that you will bring nothing but pain and suffering.”

Tarak watched Tillie stiffen. “Is that why you fed my horse those berries? Because the ancestors want you to get rid of me?”

Tarak was surprised by the accusation. It was one that he planned to make himself. He wasn’t sure why it was so shocking to hear

Tillie make the accusation. She had made a few comments on the ride that made him think that she suspected Chalipun had poisoned her horse, and Tarak hadn't stopped her thoughts.

The men around them were starting to whisper, and Tarak could see Chalipun's cheeks starting to turn pink from embarrassment. He wasn't used to women telling him what to do.

"You should learn to watch your tongue before someone makes you," Chalipun said.

Tillie sneered. "Someone like you?" she asked. "I doubt you could."

Tarak had seen men lose themselves to anger often enough that he knew the signs. Luckily, he did, because he was able to step in before

Chalipun’s fist connected with Tillie’s face.

“Control yourself!” Tarak yelled.

Tarak felt his fingers tighten around Chalipun’s meaty hand.

He brought his body closer to Chalipun’s, keeping his hand in his as he did so. “Conduct yourself with honor,” he ordered.

Shame crossed Chalipun’s face for one moment, but it didn’t take long for that share to be replaced by snide anger.

“You should be honoring your ancestors,” Chalipun said. “Your father would be ashamed to see you taking care of one of the people who killed him.” He pulled his hand out of

Tarak's grip.

Chalipun's words stung, and Tarak wanted nothing more than to show his cousin that he was weaker than he thought. But Tarak knew that that wasn't going to solve their problems. In fact, it would only strengthen the damage that had already been done to the tribe.

"You should get back on your horse," Tarak said.

"I'm not going anywhere until that girl and that horse are taken care of," Chalipun said.

Tarak looked back at Tillie, who he had thrust behind him without a second thought. He hadn't wanted her to get hurt. It had been his instinct to protect her.

“Go back to your horse,” Taza’s stern voice said. At some point, he had cut through the crowd as he entered the circle.

Chalipun sneered. “Do you see our own chief is putting this woman before all of our safety!” he said.

Tarak closed his eyes at Chalipun’s words. He’d been hoping to take care of this before his brother had to get involved. Taza getting involved was just going to make everything worse.

“I’m not putting anyone but the tribe first,” Taza said. His voice was even as he spoke, but Tarak knew his brother well enough to sense the anger that was bubbling just below the surface.

Chalipun opened his mouth to say something, but Taza fixed him with a stern look. “We all need to get back on our horses,” he announced. There was a moment of hesitation before everyone started going back to their horses. Chalipun included. He was walking slow, and Tarak suspected it was because he was keeping an ear out for any private conversations.

There was dissent in the ranks, but it brought Tarak comfort that everyone started going back to their horses.

“You should probably get back on your horse,” Taza said, looking at Tillie. He ignored Tarak. Tarak rolled his eyes at his brother’s behavior. It was clear that his anger wasn’t just reserved for Chalipun.

“That horse isn’t safe to ride,” Tarak said. “It’s only been a few hours since she ate the berries.”

Taza turned to look at Tarak. “The boys have been taking turns leading her,” he said. “They’ve not had any instances.”

“She might spook,” Tarak said. “We can’t take the risk.”

Tillie reached out and placed a hand on Tarak’s chest. He was surprised by the action, and he tried his best not to lean into her touch.

“I’ll be fine,” she said to him. Her voice was soft as she spoke. “I think that she’s fine by now. Plus, I’ve ridden much more challenging horses in my life. Now that I know she might get spooked, I can be on the lookout.”

“Good,” Taza said. He ignored Tarak’s worries. “We’ll get a move on soon. Try and stay out of trouble until then.”

“I’ll do my best,” Tillie said.

Taza gave her a stern look. It was clear that Tillie was being sarcastic, but luckily, Taza said nothing and instead turned to walk away.

“I think he’s mad at us,” she said, turning to talk to Tarak. He was surprised that she wasn’t more upset. After all, Chalipun had threatened her and tried to harm her. Tarak was angry. He hadn’t thought that his anger could get any deeper, but it had.

“He’s worried about the tribe,” Tarak said. He could understand why Taza was angry. The tribe was starting to come apart at the seams, and Tarak and Tillie weren’t helping to keep it

together.

“Should he be?” Tillie asked softly.

One of the boys brought her horse back to her, and she graced him with a soft smile. He couldn’t look her in the eye, and Tarak felt bad for Tillie as he watched her face fall.

“I guess he should be,” Tillie said. He could tell that she was upset, and he wanted nothing more than to reach out and provide her with some sort of comfort. He wanted to assure her that he didn’t hate her and that most of the tribe was simply fearful of the unknown.

“Tarak is just worried about the tribe,” he said. It was what he continued to tell her, but the words were starting to sound like an excuse for Taza not to get involved. He sighed. His brother’s inaction might end up being the

thing that drove them all apart.

“We should get going,” Tillie said. She placed her foot into her stirrup and swung herself into the saddle. She leaned down and patted her horse’s neck.

“Be careful,” Tarak said.

Tillie gave him a sweet look. He was impressed that she was so easygoing. “You know…” he said to her. He was at the bottom of the horse, looking up at her. “I’m not going to let Chalipun hurt you.”

The smile fell from Tillie’s face, and Tarak worried that he had said something that he shouldn’t have. He and Tillie had kissed once, and neither of them had talked about it since, but he couldn’t ignore the way that his heart swelled when he was near her.

“I know,” Tillie said. It was the last thing she said before she dug her heels into her horse and spurred it onward.

Chapter 23

It had been a long, eventful day, and by the time they had made camp and Tillie was able to get close to the warmth of the fire, she was asleep.

Her eyes had been heavy all day, which would explain why she was able to fall into a dreamless sleep despite the emptiness of her stomach and the sounds around her.

Tillie wasn't sure how long she had been asleep when she felt a soft shaking. "Tillie?" a soft voice whispered in her ear.

Tillie groaned and turned over to try and get away from the pest that was starting to bother her.

“Tillie?” the voice called out once more. She could feel the tickling of it in her ear, and she groaned once more.

“What?” she asked. She tried to turn away from the voice. Her eyes were too heavy, and all that she wanted to do was lean back into the warmth of her blanket and ignore whoever was trying to pull her out of the slumber.

“Wake up,” the voice called. “Don’t wanna,” she said. She curled up. She hadn’t had a good night’s sleep since she had taken to the road. Sleeping on the ground in a corset was not comfortable in the least. Still she had finally gotten so exhausted that it didn’t matter. Now, someone wanted to pull her from the coziness of her slumber.

“Come on,” that warm voice whispered in her

ear. “You aren’t going to want to miss this.”

Tillie groaned before sitting upright. She pressed her knuckles into her eyes, clearing away the sleep. “What are you doing?” she asked Tarak. Tarak was sitting next to her, so close that she could smell the cloves and sage on his skin.

“I want to show you something,” he said.

Tillie looked at him incredulously. She could hardly believe that Tarak was going to wake her up from the best sleep she’d had in weeks simply to show her something.

“What could you possibly want to show me in the middle of the night?” she asked. Looking around, she knew that it had to be late.

All of the Apache men she could see were sound asleep, and Tillie couldn't blame them. The long days in the hot sun sapped a person of all of their strength. "Aren't you supposed to be on watch?" she asked.

Tarak snorted. "I am," he said.

"Right now, I don't think you are watching too closely if you are waking me up in the middle of the night."

Tarak made a small sound in the back of his throat. It was somewhere between a snort and a laugh, and Tillie decided that she loved the sound of it.

"Come on," he said. He reached out a hand, and Tillie hesitated for a moment. She wanted nothing more than to go back to bed, but the

pull of having a moment with Tarak was more appealing.

“Fine,” she said. She placed her small hand in his and allowed him to pull her to her feet.

Tillie stood up and adjusted her dress. She might not be excited to see her father, but she was excited about the possibility of sleeping without a corset on.

“You know you don’t have to wear so many layers,” Tarak said as they gingerly walked away from the camp. Tillie did her best to step over the men who were sleeping by the fire. Tillie had learned that the Apache men were light sleepers, and so, she tried to be as quiet as she could be.

“Excuse me?” she asked. His statement was confusing to her.

When she looked at Tarak, she could see a bit of a blush on his cheeks, which had been highlighted in the moonlight.

“You just don’t seem comfortable. It’s warm in the desert.”

Tillie chuckled. She wanted to remind him that it was actually very cold in the desert at night, but she didn’t. She knew that Tarak had good intentions.

“I’m fine,” Tillie said. “Besides, it wouldn’t be proper for me to go around half-dressed.”

Tarak released a snort. “The Apache women dress much plainer, and they are hardly half-dressed.”

Tillie didn't say anything. She hadn't really seen an Apache woman, so she couldn't comment on their style of dress. The Apache men dressed differently from her father, who was normally in a suit, but they didn't dress much differently from the men who ran her father's ranch.

"Where are we going?" she asked. They were walking at a fast pace. Her dress catching dust at the hem as they walked further and further away from the camp.

"I told you that I wanted to show you something," Tarak said.

"In the middle of the night?" Tillie couldn't believe that she was following a man into the unknown in the dark. She couldn't believe that she had impulsively kissed that man either.

These days, the only thing that was proper about her was her clothing.

“It’s not something that I could have shown you during the day,” he said.

Tillie couldn’t help but be intrigued. She wondered what he could possibly need to show her in the middle of the night.

The air was cool and sweet, and as they walked further and further away from camp, things got quieter. The sounds of the bugs and the distant crackling fire were the only things that she heard.

As they walked in silence, Tillie was struck by how much she had come to trust Tarak in such a short time. Here she was, walking into the unknown with him, away from the comfort of the camp, and she was sure that nothing bad

would befall her.

She shivered as she remembered the intensity of his earlier words. When he'd helped her back on her horse, he had promised her that he wouldn't let anything bad happen to her, and for the first time in her life, she had believed him.

"It's just up ahead," he said.

The path towards wherever they were going started to get rocky, and Tillie had to do her best to keep her footing. She tried not to call out as her boot slipped on one of the rocks.

"Easy," Tarak said. He reached out and grabbed her around the waist. They were so close that she could feel the muscles protruding from his clothing as she clung to him. With the moonlight highlighting his dark

features, Tillie was sure that Tarak was the most handsome man she had ever seen.

“I’m okay,” Tillie said. She pulled away from Tarak slightly. Though she wanted nothing more than to swoon in Tarak’s warm arms, she knew that she couldn’t do that. She remembered the anger Taza had expressed when he had seen the two of them sharing their kiss.

“Hold onto me,” he said. Tillie grasped Tarak’s hand tightly as he led her up a small, rocky incline. When they finally got to the crest, her breath was taken away as she saw the view.

“Wow,” Tillie said. The top of the crest had allowed her to see around the entire desert. She could see the camp in the distance. The fire was crackling in the darkness, and she could make out the men. “It’s beautiful here.”

“There’s more,” he said.

Tillie wasn’t sure what more there could be. She had never been one for nature, but even she could appreciate what was before her.

“More?” she asked. “More than this view?”

Tarak nodded excitedly. He reached out a hand towards her, and Tillie happily took it once more. She allowed him to guide her towards whatever else it was that he wanted to show her.

“Here it is,” he said. “I found it when I was scouting for a position to keep watch. I’m not so worried about men coming out and attacking as I am about animals.” Tarak pressed his free hand to his flute. “From here, I can see the camp surroundings. If an animal

gets too close, I can alert the men."

"And this flower is special in some way?" Tillie asked.

As she looked down at the plant, she felt slightly underwhelmed by it. It was some sort of cacti that had large, red blooming fruit handing off of its green leaves.

"This," Tarak said. He grabbed one of the fruits and pulled it from the tree. "Is called a pitaya," he told her.

Tillie's eyebrow rose. She was surprised to see Tarak so excited about a piece of fruit. She hadn't known Tarak for a long amount of time, but he had always seemed to be someone who was unflappable. She couldn't understand why this pitaya was so exciting to him.

“I haven’t seen one of these in years,” he told her. “When I was a boy, my father found one, and he let Taza and I enjoy the fruit.”

Tillie smiled to herself. Suddenly, things were starting to make sense. Tarak was excited to see a tree that held memories of his father. Tillie could understand that. She knew what it was like to lose a parent.

She still kept a bottle of her mother’s toilet water on her vanity. She had left it behind in an effort to try and move on from the grief that always seemed to permeate her. She was glad for it. It would have broken long ago.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he told her.

“Like what?” Tillie asked.

“Like I am being silly,” he told her. “I’m excited because this pitaya fruit is one of the most delicious things that I have ever eaten.”

Tarak pulled his knife from the waistband of his pants. Tillie had gotten used to seeing all of the Apache men with weapons. Some, like Tarak, kept knives and axes on their belts. Others kept bows across their chests. She noticed that even in sleep, the Apache men were always ready for battle.

“Try this,” Tarak said. There was a sliver of white fruit on the edge of his knife. The piece of fruit glistened in the moonlight, the juices dripped from the blade and onto the ground.

“Are you sure that it is edible?” she asked.

Tarak gave her a stern look. “Do you think that I would give you something that would harm you?” he asked. There was an undercurrent of anger in Tarak’s voice, and Tillie felt terrible.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Given everything that happened, Tillie was a bit on edge about things. But she knew that Tarak was never going to harm her.

To show him that she trusted him, Tillie reached down and pulled the piece of fruit from the knife. She popped it into her mouth, not expecting too much. But when she placed the fruit in her mouth, she couldn’t stop the low moan that came out of her mouth.

“This is amazing!” she said.

The flavor of the fruit exploded on her tongue. It was sweet and tart, and the juice quenched a thirst that she didn't even know that she had.

Tarak gave her a sly smile. "I told you that you wouldn't regret it."

"You were right," Tillie said. She couldn't ignore the delicious taste of the fruit. It was unlike anything that she had ever had. She couldn't really describe its flavor properly, but after weeks of living on dried animal meat and fire-roasted game, she couldn't ignore the delicious flavor of the fruit.

"Here," Tarak said. "Have another piece."

He cut off a sliver of the fruit and gave it to her. Tillie happily took it and popped it into

her mouth. The two of them stood there in the moonlight happily munching on the pitaya fruit. Tillie couldn't remember the last time that she had felt such peace.

"Was this worth getting woken up for?" he asked her.

Tillie nodded. "It was. It was more than worth it."

Tarak gave her a wide smile, and Tillie was sure that sitting with him was much better than sleeping.

Chapter 24

Tarak hadn't planned to bring Tillie up to his perch. He was supposed to be keeping watch, but when he saw the fruit, and the view, he couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like to share something like this with her.

Tillie had a way of worming her way into his thoughts these days. But he also couldn't ignore the fact that she was obviously exhausted. When she released a loud yawn, he knew that it was time for her to go back to sleep. He had a few more hours of his watch left, so he wouldn't be going to sleep any time soon.

"We should get you back to camp," he said. They had eaten one fruit each, laughing as the juices coated their hands and faces. Tarak couldn't remember the last time he had felt so

light. But by the time they were done with the fruit, reality had come and reared her ugly head.

“I’m not tired now,” she said.

Tarak smiled. “You were just yawning,” he reminded her. “And I’ve never had more trouble waking up anyone in my entire life.”

Tillie gave him a stern look. “I hadn’t expected someone to wake me up,” she said.

Tarak instantly felt guilty though he knew he shouldn’t. He suspected that Tillie hadn’t been sleeping well. She wasn’t used to the hard days of riding, and she also wasn’t used to sleeping on the ground.

I shouldn't have woken her up, he thought. As he looked closer at Tillie in the moonlight, he noticed that underneath her eyes was starting to turn a purplish color from lack of sleep. He felt bad for not having seen it before.

"I'm sorry," Tarak said. "I should have allowed you to sleep. I could have packed the fruit for another time."

Tillie reached out and placed her hand on his chest. It was an intimate gesture that surprised Tarak. It was similar to the one she had done to him when she had attempted to calm him after their altercation with Chalipun.

This time, he wrapped his fingers around hers and squeezed them slightly.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," she told him. "I would have been sorry to miss such a

view.”

Tarak smiled. “You know, you have a way of turning everything that I thought I knew on its head,” he told her.

“How so?” Tillie asked. He knew that her people weren’t ones for physical affection, so he was surprised that she hadn’t pulled away from him by now.

“I thought I knew everything there was to know about your people,” he told her.

Tillie quirked an eyebrow. It was what she did when she was confused by something he said to her. “How so?”

Tarak sighed. He didn’t want to be having this

conversation right now. He didn't care anymore about the differences between her people and his. It didn't matter to him.

"I always thought that your people didn't have hearts," he said. "I thought that your people only knew how to destroy…" Tarak trailed off. He could feel Tillie stiffen, and he knew that he wasn't going about this the right way.

"You sound like Chalipun," she said. She pulled away from him slightly, and he knew that his words had upset her.

"Until recently, I thought similarly to Chalipun," he said. He thought back to the moment before he had met Tillie. He had felt something in the air, and at the time, he had thought that it meant that danger was near them. Now, he thought that it was a sign of the changes that were about to take place.

His words changed Tillie, and she turned slightly. “What changed your mind?” she asked. Her voice was low, and Tarak could tell that she was more affected by what he was saying than she was trying to pretend to be.

Against his better judgment, Tarak reached out to Tillie. He cupped her elbows with his hands rubbing his thumbs over her exposed skin. He could feel the goosebumps breaking out across her skin.

“You,” he said. “You changed my mind.” Tarak wasn’t normally so open, but when he was around Tillie, he wanted to be someone different. She was always open. She said exactly what she was thinking, which is why people were drawn to her.

“How did I do that?” she asked. “You hated me when you first met me. You wanted to leave me on the road, remember?”

Tarak tried not to cringe as he thought about how he had been willing to leave Tillie on her own. He had been determined to not get involved with her or her people.

“Seeing how kind you were to Elan and Bipin made me realize that I was not being fair to you,” he said. “I was doing exactly what I had accused your people of doing to us.” Tarak wasn’t proud to admit it. He hadn’t been fair to Tillie when he had first met her. Though he didn’t think that his brother’s plan was going to work, he also saw the value in the Apache and Tillie’s people working together.

Tarak didn’t think that the two groups would be able to survive if they didn’t find a way to live in harmony.

“I told you before that I didn’t see people as

yours or mine," she said. "Elan is a good boy. He reminds me of the brother I never had. I like spending time with him."

"And Bipin?" Tarak asked. Bipin wasn't like Elan. He was a crusty old man who shouldn't have been on the road with them to begin with, and yet, Tillie had defied Chalipun and the healer to minimize his pain.

"Bipin didn't deserve the kind of pain he was in," she said. She cocked her head to the side, and her face took on a defiant look. "Besides, I enjoy an opportunity to make Chalipun angry."

Tarak released a heavy sigh and reached out to gather Tillie in his arms. He didn't think twice about it. "You need to be careful around Chalipun," he told her.

Tillie was stiff in his arms. He knew that she was sensitive about the way that he talked about her people. But he couldn't let this go. He knew that she was trying to appear as though she didn't care about Chalipun, but Tarak needed her to care. Chalipun was more dangerous than he had ever thought his cousin could be, and he needed Tillie to understand that.

"I'm not scared of Chalipun," she said. "I've survived much worse than him." Tillie's eyes took on a faraway look, and he knew that she was thinking more about what had happened when her stagecoach had been ambushed. Two of her friends had died that night, and though she never spoke much about it, he knew that their deaths weighed heavily on her.

"Just be careful," he said. "Chalipun believes what he is saying. He believes that the ancestors are trying to warn the tribe about you."

Tillie said nothing, but he felt her shiver in his arms. He wanted to remind her that he was going to protect her, but he didn't.

"I'll be fine," she said. Tarak wasn't assured, but he didn't say more. He just held Tillie in his arms and sent a plea to the ancestors. Unlike Chalipun, Tarak believed that the ancestors were benevolent, and he prayed that they would keep all of them safe.

Tillie had stayed with Tarak until she was half asleep, and his watch was nearly up. He smiled as he remembered holding her the entire night. They hadn't spoken much after he warned her away from Chalipun. She'd simply allowed him to hold her in his arms. No matter what happened next, and Tarak wasn't sure what was going to happen

between the two of them, he would cherish the memory of that night for the rest of his life.

“Come walk with me,” Taza said. His deep voice caused Tarak to jump. He had been preparing his horse for the next leg of their journey. They were only a few days away from Arizona, and Taza was desperate to get to Tubac.

Tarak sighed. He didn’t want to be too far from Tillie. He had meant what he said to her last night. He was worried about Chalipun and what he might do at the slightest provocation. He had already tried to harm Tillie.

Taza noticed Tarak’s hesitation. “I asked Bipin to watch Tillie,” he said.

Tarak said nothing, but he looked over

towards where Taza was gesturing, and he saw Bipin was helping Tillie to tie her things to her horse.

“Come,” Taza said once more, and this time Tarak followed.

He and his brother walked towards the edge of the camp, far enough away that no one was going to hear them, but close enough that people wouldn’t come looking for them.

“If you mean to scold me,” Tarak said, “you can save it. I know that yesterday didn’t go well, but Chalipun was out of line.”

Taza looked at him. His dark eyes betrayed no emotion.

“You have to know that he fed Tillie’s horse those berries. He could have killed her. I don’t think your plan to unite her people and ours will go over very well if we bring her back dead.”

Tarak couldn’t stop his voice from rising at the words.

The emotionless expression on Taza’s face didn’t change, but Tarak noticed small ticks that betrayed his anger. His hands balled into fists, and the skin above his right eyebrow was starting to twitch.

“Be that as it may,” he said. “Chalipun was not the one going against his tribe.”

Tarak couldn’t stop the snort of derision that came out of his mouth. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You are taking his side

over mine?" Tarak asked. He knew that his brother was worried about the division that Chalipun was sowing within the tribe. It had been evident when no one had stood up to Chalipun when he tried to harm Tillie. Every single one of them had known that Chalipun had fed those poisonous berries to Tillie's horse. No one else would have wanted to do it.

"I've told you before that I'm not taking any sides," he said. "But I need to be mindful of the fact that the tribe is in a delicate place, and as I said before, many of them are questioning your ability to think straight. The men know that there is something between you and Tillie. They aren't as blind as you think."

"Whatever they think they know doesn't excuse the fact that they know that Chalipun's actions are wrong. The Apache are warriors. We don't just hurt women because we think that the ancestors are sending us signs to do so."

Taza sighed. Tarak was becoming frustrated with his brother. He could understand the precarious position that he was in, but Tarak was starting to feel as though his brother was making convenient excuses. He was willing to use Tillie for his own gain, but he didn't want to stick his own neck on the line.

"I don't disagree with you," Taza said. "But there's nothing I can do. Chalipun said he didn't do it, and as I said before, most of the men are not inclined to take Tillie's side of things."

"They'd take yours," Tarak reminded his brother. "After all, you are still chief of the tribe."

"I told you before…."

“You made excuses before,” Tarak said.

Taza shook his head. It was clear that he was frustrated by their conversation, but Tarak didn’t care. His brother was being reckless, and he was doing it with Tillie’s life.

“I know that you enjoy Tillie’s company, but you also have responsibilities…” Taza trailed off.

“And I continue to fulfill my obligations,” he said. “And that means reminding you what the Apache warriors stand for.”

Tarak said nothing further as he walked away from his brother. He never thought that he would be the only one standing up for what was right. He was starting to wonder if his

brother was just as culpable of guilt as Chalipun.

They were both using Tillie for their own reasons—Taza to unify the tribe and her people, and Chalipun to feed his paranoia and belief in the ancestors. Tarak wasn't going to allow Tillie to get caught up in this tribal business. He was going to get her home, and he was going to make sure that he made it there safely.

Chapter 25

Tillie was walking beside her horse. They were all taking a break, and Tillie was grateful for it. Her legs were aching from all the riding. She had gotten more used to the long times in the saddle, but there were still days where her legs quivered and her thighs burned.

Today was one of those days. Things were made especially more challenging because of how exhausted she felt. She wouldn't change the time she was able to spend with Tarak last night, but she was starting to feel the effects of another long night.

"Are you ill?" Taza asked. He had invited her to ride at the front of the tribe. Tillie knew that it was a great honor, but she had to work hard to keep up with the top riders who surrounded Taza. She also suspected that Taza

wanted to talk to her about Tarak, which was a topic she did not care to get into.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just tired.” She stifled a yawn as she spoke. Taza was desperate to get her home, so he was barely allowing them to have a rest during the last leg of their trip. She couldn’t blame him. After all, so many terrible things had occurred on the journey that even a part of Tillie was starting to wonder if she was cursed in some way.

“Maybe, you and my brother should reconsider all of your late nights together.”

Tillie felt herself stiffen. Her fingers tightened around the leather reins she held. “I’m not sure what you mean?” she asked.

She decided that she would play as though she didn’t know anything about what Taza was

saying. She wasn't stupid. She had seen Taza and Tarak talking before they had taken off for the morning leg of their journey. Tarak had stormed off angrily, and she knew that she was at the center of whatever they were arguing about.

"I know that there is something going on between you and Tarak," Taza told her.

"We are friends," she said. "Tarak has helped me along the journey." Tillie might be a young woman, but Taza was out of his mind if he thought that she was going to fold so easily. Tillie had grown up around society women. She knew how to keep a secret almost better than anyone else.

"I know that you two shared a kiss," Taza said.

Tillie had been unsure of whether Taza had

seen what had happened between her and Tarak that night. She knew that he had seen them in a compromising position, but she hadn't realized that he had seen everything.

Tillie was quiet. She wasn't going to say anything else.

Taza sighed. Obviously, he realized that Tillie wasn't going to say anything else about the matter. He was right. She wasn't going to try and justify what had and maybe continued happening between her and Tarak. She had never felt the way she did about Tarak about anyone else. Not that she had been around a lot of men to feel that way, but she knew that what was in her heart was rare.

"You have to know that what is going on between the two of you can't continue," Taza said.

His words were low as he spoke to her. He sounded concerned, and she couldn't stop the plummeting feeling in her chest.

"I don't know what you are talking about," she said.

But she did know what he was talking about. It had been easy to ignore that there were things that would make anything real impossible between Tillie and Tarak.

"You do," Taza said. "Tarak is a warrior, but he's a romantic at heart. That's why he is always playing that flute. He's always appreciated beautiful things." Taza gave her a pointed look, and Tillie felt her cheeks turning red.

"Why are you telling me all of this?" she

asked. “If you are concerned about him, maybe you should be speaking to him.”

Tillie’s horse continued walking forward. She wasn’t looking at Taza as they continued their unending journey.

“I tried speaking to him,” Taza said. Tillie wondered if the two brothers had spoken earlier this morning, and that was why Taza was speaking to her now. He wanted to try to break through to her because speaking to his brother had clearly not worked.

“But he didn’t listen to you?” Tillie asked. She couldn’t stop the elated feeling inflating her chest. She knew that it was wrong, but she liked the way that Tarak had defended whatever odd thing existed between the two of them.

“He didn’t,” Taza said. “And I’m hoping that you will.”

The elation that Tillie felt suddenly went away. “Why?” she asked. “Anything between the two of us is between us. It has nothing to do with you or anyone else.” Tillie truly believed that. She could feel herself getting angry as Taza continued to speak. She imagined that this was the same way that Tarak had felt.

Taza shook his head. “It’s not that simple,” he said. “Tarak is my second. The men look up to him, and the men don’t like you.”

Tillie snorted. “I can’t understand why a bunch of Apache warriors are scared of a girl who can’t seem to stay on her horse.”

Taza gave her a small smile, but Tillie could

see the sadness behind his eyes. He knew that he was going to tell her something similar to what Tarak said before, about how the Apache feared her. She wasn't in the mood to hear it.

"None of this is going to matter soon," Tillie said. "We are only a few days away from my home, and when you return me, I doubt that Tarak and I will ever see one another again." Bitterness had seeped into her voice. She didn't want to think about not ever seeing Tarak again. The thought of such a thing caused a deep hole in her heart, and she wasn't sure that she could ever fill it again.

"I know that you don't think much of me," Taza said.

Tillie stiffened. "It's not that," she said. "I appreciate all that you and your men have done to see me safely home." Tillie did appreciate it. Despite the men not trusting her, and Chalipun's stories of the evils of her

people, Tillie would never forget the kindness that the Apache had shown her. When she was safely back on her father's ranch, it would be because of them.

For a moment, there was a stretch of silence between the two of them, and Tillie thought that they were going to just ignore the rest of the conversation. At least, that was what she hoped. Tillie didn't want to talk about any of this anymore. Thinking about not seeing Tarak again made her feel as though there was a part of her heart missing.

"I'm trying to do what is best for everyone involved," he said.

Tillie had no doubt that that was what Taza thought, but she knew deep down that he was trying to do what was best for the Apache. As long as they were in alignment, he would do what was best for her. She had no qualms that when she was no longer useful to him, he

would not be focused on her well-being.

“So you say,” Tillie said.

She wasn’t going to bow down to his thoughts, but she also had no reason to make Taza her enemy. At the end of the day, he was the chief of the tribe, and she was traveling with them at his pleasure.

“I care about my brother,” Taza told her. “I don’t want to see him unhappy.”

Tillie bit the inside of her lip. She too, didn’t want to see Tarak unhappy, but she couldn’t help but wonder if all of this hatred made him that way. When they had first met, Tillie had seen kindness in his eyes. It had been hidden, but it had been there. It wasn’t something that she could unsee.

Despite Tarak's outward desire to have nothing to do with her, she knew, even then, that inside of that shell, there was a good man.

"I don't think you give Tarak enough credit," Tillie said. She could relate. Her entire life people had told her what to think, what to feel, and how to be. Though Tarak never complained about his brother, she suspected that being the brother to the chief came with certain expectations. "He may know his own mind better than you do."

"Perhaps," Taza said. She could tell from his tone that he didn't think much about what she was saying.

Tillie sighed. Taza might be willing to bring her home, but she was beginning to realize that, like Chalipun, his views on things didn't necessarily align with her own.

“Why do you want peace with my people?” she asked.

“I told you…” Taza trailed off.

Tillie shook her head. She remembered what he had told her. When she thought back to it, she had taken his words at face value, not questioning them too much. Tillie hadn’t known much about the Apache men and assumed that they simply didn’t want to go out of their way to drop off a stray. Now, she knew that a great deal of them thought that she was a harbinger of doom.

“Have you thought about how the rest of your tribe will feel about you brokering peace with my people?” she asked. Her voice was low and urgent. She was starting to see why Tarak didn’t think his brother’s plan was going to

work. “If you are worried about how it’ll look to them if Tarak and I are friendly, then I can’t imagine how it will appear if you are trying to get them to make peace.”

“That’s different,” Taza said.

“Peace is the only way forward. We can’t survive if we don’t aim for it. Your people have diseases and guns, and as they take more and more of our land, it’s clear that we won’t survive them.”

Tillie understood Taza’s desperation. She didn’t want to take anything from the Apache people. She was still learning about their way of life, but she was starting to realize that despite their differences, they were still just people. They had hopes, fears, and desires, the same as everyone else she knew.

Her concern was that Taza would be asking his men to give up their fear and hatred of her people in a way that was going to be too soon and too forceful. She wondered what would happen to him and to Tarak if the Apache decided they weren't happy with what their chief wanted.

Taza was so worried about politics that he didn't even want the perception of something between her and Tarak.

"I hope that your men will be able to hear that," Tillie said. "Because I fear that you might unknowingly be making things worse."

Taza said nothing. Tillie hadn't expected him to. She simply hoped that some of what she had said would sink in for him. Tillie knew that Tarak was nervous about the men and didn't think that his brother's plan was a good one.

The more time that she was spending with the Apache, the more she was beginning to think that he Tarak correct.

Chapter 26

“Stop staring like that,” Bipin said.

Tarak was walking beside the older man, towards the back of the line. His brother had asked him and Bipin to take up the rear. He claimed that he wanted to make sure that the younger boys were safe, but as Tarak watched his brother speak to Tillie, he suspected that he wanted the two of them separated.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he said to Bipin. He didn’t know why the older man had been delegated to the bad side as well. It wasn’t a place of prominence. Though Tarak didn’t generally care about his placement in the tribe, this bothered him. He didn’t like his brother going behind his back, and this felt like what he was doing.

“You are staring at your brother like you’d like to throw your axe at his head,” Bipin said.

Tarak tried his best to fix his face so that it was expressionless. He wasn’t used to being so easy to read.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Tarak said, but even as he spoke, his eyes were glued to Tillie and Taza. They were walking their horses to give them a break and stretch their muscles, and it was slightly more difficult for Tarak to see Tillie’s small frame.

“I’ve never seen you so openly angry with your brother,” he said. “Is it because he sent you away from his side?”

Tarak released a snort and shook his head.

“I’m not angry with Taza.” It wasn’t exactly a falsehood. Tarak was more frustrated and concerned with his brother than angry.

Bipin snorted. “You might be the only one,” he said.

This immediately drew Tarak’s attention to the older man. “Don’t look so shocked,” he said. “You have to know that the tribe is divided. There are those who believe it was our duty to see Tillie home and others….”

Bipin trailed off. Tarak wondered if it was because Bipin knew that Tarak was likely to bite his head off if he talked poorly about Tillie. He couldn’t seem to stop his protectiveness when it came to her. It was instinctual.

“Your cousin has been stirring up anger. It

doesn't help that there have been so many accidents."

Tarak snorted once more and shook his head. "You've been on enough travels to know that this is hardly the worst that's ever happened."

Looking at Bipin's face, Tarak knew that he was right. He remembered when someone's arm had been ripped off by a coyote. They hadn't been able to save the man's life, and it was one of the first people Tarak had seen die violently.

Even now, he shuddered as he remembered all of the blood.

"I didn't say that I believed what they were all saying," Bipin said.

Tarak looked at the older man. His face was lined with age, and there was a haunted look in his eyes. Tarak wondered what had caused it. From what Tarak knew about the man, his children were still alive, and he had a grandchild on the way.

Tarak was surprised that he had decided to come on this trip, but he wasn't going to say that aloud. Even though he was the first in line to inherit the chiefdom, Tarak still knew that it was best to respect his elders.

"What do you believe?" Tarak asked.

There was a stretch of quiet before Bipin said anything. "I think that you are in love with Tillie," Bipin said. "And I'm not the only one who thinks that way."

Tarak stiffened. He didn't know what to say to that. "That's not what I meant," he said. "I meant which side of the this you fell on."

Tarak did not want to talk about his feelings for Tillie with Bipin, especially because he wasn't even sure what he was feeling. He knew that he cared about her. He thought about her constantly, and yesterday, being able to hold her in his arms had made him happier than he could ever remember being. But that wasn't something that he needed to tell Bipin.

What he wanted to know was if Bipin would be an ally should they need one. Tarak hoped that things wouldn't go that way, but he couldn't ignore the truth, which was that Chalipun grew deadlier as the days continued.

"I don't agree with Taza," Bipin said.

Tarak felt his fingers tighten on the leather of the reins. “Chalipun has lost himself,” Tarak said.

“I agree,” Bipin said.

Tarak’s eyebrow rose. He was confused by Bipin’s words. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I know that Taza wants to use Tillie to broker peace between our people,” he said.

Tarak was shocked. Bipin might have been the oldest member of their tribe, but he wasn’t part of Taza’s inner circle.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Bipin said. “Everyone suspects what Tarak plans to do. This isn’t the

first time that he had talked about wanting to broker some sort of peace."

"You don't want to make peace?" he asked. Bipin had seen war. He'd seen what Tillie's people could do, but he was surprised that he wouldn't want to broker some sort of peace. Tarak had only been in a few battles, and he would give a great deal to never be in such a situation again.

"I don't think that peace is possible," Bipin said. There was a sadness in his voice.

"Because of the Apache or because of the white men?" Tarak asked.

Bipin laughed. "Both," he said. "But to answer the question that you are asking, I don't think that the Apache can keep their way of life and make peace with the white men."

Tarak said nothing. If he were honest, he was worried that the Apache weren't going to be able to survive much longer with or without Tillie's people.

"But I don't think that Tillie is a harbinger of doom," Bipin said. His voice brought Tarak's mind back to the situation at hand.

"You don't?" Tarak asked.

Bipin shook his head. "I don't," he said.

"Because she helped you?" Tarak knew that Bipin had been wary of Tillie when she first came. He hadn't said anything openly, but he hadn't made an effort to help her. No one really had, which is why Tarak had to step in.

He wanted to believe that his brother was simply too busy to have thought about certain things.

“Partially,” Bipin said. “It was kind of her, and neither Chalipun nor the healer made that kindness easy on her.”

Tarak said nothing. Tillie’s instance had made things worse for her.

“Why else don’t you agree with Chalipun?” Tarak wondered. He wondered if there were other men like Bipin, ones who didn’t agree with Taza’s plan but wouldn’t follow Chalipun if he made a play for the chiefdom.

“Chalipun fed Tillie’s horse those berries,” Bipin said. “All of the men know it, and one of the boys saw him do it.”

“What?” Tarak asked. This was news to him.

“He spoke to your brother yesterday,” Bipin said.

This time, Tarak did feel anger. His brother hadn’t said anything to him. He had made him feel as though he were betraying the tribe by arguing with Chalipun and accusing him of feeding the horse those berries.

“You didn’t know?” Bipin said.

Tarak said nothing. He didn’t want anyone to know about the chasm that was forming between him and his brother, especially because these days, it just seemed to be getting wider and wider.

“I assumed that was why he had Tillie riding with him today.”

Tarak suspected that Tillie was riding with his brother because his brother wanted to keep Tarak and Tillie apart. Though Tarak wasn’t ready to think about what Tillie had come to mean to him, he couldn’t hide his head in the sand any longer.

Bipin had acknowledged that he knew something was between Tillie and Tarak, and if he knew, it stood to reason that other people did as well.

“Or maybe there’s another reason your brother has decided that Tillie should be by his side.”

Tarak said nothing. Tillie and Taza had been

speaking since they dismounted, and even from far away, Tarak could tell that she was frustrated by whatever his brother was saying to her.

Bipin released a heavy sigh. “I don’t want to say this to you, but I feel as though it’s my responsibility.”

Tarak pulled his attention from Tillie, which he didn’t want to do. He wanted to march towards his brother and have him explain what he had said to upset her. But that wasn’t an option. While Tarak hated to admit it, his brother keeping Tillie by his side was probably what was best. There was no safer place for her than by the side of the chief.

“You owe me nothing,” Tarak said. He knew Bipin, but not well. He couldn’t understand why the man would feel any sort of responsibility towards him.

“I was friends with your father,” Bipin said. “He would have wanted me to talk some sense into you.”

Tarak sighed. He suspected that he knew what Bipin was about to say. “I don’t need to know what my father would say about all of this,” Tarak told Bipin. His father would have cuffed his ears if he knew that he harbored any feelings for Tillie.

Bipin looked at him sympathetically, and Tarak wanted nothing more than for him to not say anything more about him and Tillie.

“You are second in line,” Bipin reminded him. As if he needed a reminder. Until Taza took a wife and fathered a child, Tarak would be the next in line to inherit the chiefdom. It was why he had to be just as careful as his brother.

“I am aware of that,” Tarak said. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

Bipin sighed. “I know that there are some Apache who have taken the white men’s daughters as wives….”

Tarak said nothing, but he clenched his jaw so hard that he worried it was going to snap in two. “I have no intention of taking Tillie as a wife.” Tarak knew that such a thing would never work out. Even he wasn’t so naïve.
“That’s good to hear,” Bipin said. There was no judgment in his voice, and though Tarak didn’t know the man well, he knew that Bipin was only doing what he thought was right. “But it doesn’t ignore the fact that all of the men know how you feel about Tillie. Your fight with Chalipun made them nervous.”

“Why?” Tarak asked.

“They fear that you will choose her and her people over the Apache.”

Tarak almost laughed. That was a completely ridiculous idea. Tarak was an Apache. His loyalty was to his tribe. But that didn’t mean that he could completely control his heart. He hadn’t set out to feel things for Tillie, but he couldn’t help it.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked.

“Because I want you to understand that that is why most of the men don’t like Tillie. They are worried that she is going to tear this entire tribe apart.”

Tarak said nothing. Bipin’s words caused the

small hairs on his arms to stand up. He felt an odd sensation in his stomach. This was the same sensation that he felt right before he had seen Tillie's stagecoach.

"What is it?" Bipin asked. He must have sensed Tarak's unease on his face.

Before Tarak could say anything, the earth began to shake, and as Tarak looked forward, he saw wide-eyed fear on Tillie's face. That fear mirrored his own, as Tarak realized where Tillie and his brother were standing.

Chapter 27

At first, Tillie thought that the lack of sleep and food was starting to play tricks on her mind. There was no way that the Earth was moving under their feet. But as she took a second to look at Taza, she realized that something was indeed happening.

“Earthquake!” someone yelled.

Tillie didn’t know what an earthquake was, or what she could do, but she knew that it wasn’t good. Tillie felt herself starting to panic as she looked at Taza’s wide eyes.

“What’s happening?” she asked. She hated the sound of her own voice. It was weak with fear. But just as quickly as the shaking had started,

it ended. Tillie blinked in confusion. She had never experienced anything such as that before, and she hoped that she would never experience it again.

“Everyone on your horses,” Taza yelled. He jumped on his horse with a speed that left Tillie shocked. “We need to ride out of the valley and to the crest of the hill.”

Tillie wasn’t the only person confused and scared. From the looks of things, the men and especially the boys were all worried about whatever had just happened.

“Get on your horses!” Taza yelled.

“We won’t!” Chalipun cried out. “We don’t leave this spot until the harbinger is dealt with.”

Tillie's mind was reeling, and her heart was racing. She couldn't make sense of what Chalipun was going on about. From the look of anger on Taza's face, she could tell that her was angry at his cousin. It was the first time that she had seen such an expression on his face.

"We need to ride out of the clearing," Taza said. There was a bit of desperation in his voice. That only caused Tillie's fear to begin to grow. She didn't understand what was happening, but she knew that if it was enough to make Taza scared, then it was something serious.

"He's right!" The sound of Tarak's voice startled and soothed Tillie at the same time. He was walking towards her, pulling his horse along the way. "If there's another shake, we are in the middle of a valley. If rocks begin falling, someone is going to get hurt!"

There was a renewed sense of urgency in the men, and they began to grab their horses and hurry to mount them.

“Harm will keep coming to us as long as that girl is here!” Chalipun screamed. Tillie turned to look at him. He was sitting atop his horse, one of the only men who was pointing his finger at her.

“The earth shifts in this land regularly!” Tarak yelled. “You know that.”

Chalipun would not be listened to. “I know that the ancestors are trying to give us a sign, and they are punishing us because we haven’t heeded it.”

Tillie felt several pairs of eyes looking at her

with anger and fear. Chalipun's words were working. Tillie wondered if a great many of these men had also never experienced an earthquake before.

"We can all argue about this later!" Tarak said. "We need to make sure that we are getting out of the clearing as quickly as possible."

Tillie went to get herself back on her horse. Unlike Chalipun, she was going to listen to Tarak and Taza. She trusted both of them, and she could feel the palatable fear they had of the earth shifting once more.

But Tillie didn't have time to get on her horse before the earth began to shift under her feet. Her foot had been in her stirrup, and she had nearly been able to get into the saddle before the moving began again.

There were shouts as men started running. The smart ones, who had been on their horses, were able to ride away quickly. Most hadn't mounted, and as the shaking became more and more intense, Tillie could hear the fear in their screams as they tried to find somewhere safe to go.

All of this jumbled together in Tillie's mind, causing her to stand still in shock as everyone around her ran for their lives.

"Tillie!" the sound of Elan's sweet voice drew her attention. He was on his horse, rushing towards her.

"Elan!" she yelled back. Seeing the young boy jumpstarted her into action. "Go the other way!" she shouted. Tillie and Taza had stopped in the middle of the valley, which Tillie was sure wasn't a good place to be, especially as she saw rocks starting to fall.

Even though it killed Tillie, she released her horse and started rushing towards Elan. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she knew that she had to stop him. The ground seemed to be shifting faster and faster, and the small rocks that tumbled down the cliff started becoming larger and larger.

Tillie's eyes widened as she looked at the rocks. They were coming down fast and furiously, and she was beginning to realize that either she or Elan were going to be crushed, possibly both. The thought of Elan being harmed because of her spurred Tillie on, even as small rocks sliced her skin.

"Turn back!" she yelled again, but Elan either couldn't hear her or wasn't listening. Tillie started waving her hands at the boy, hoping that he would understand her.

But Elan was an Apache warrior, and he continued galloping toward her. All of that was made more difficult because of the shifting of the earth. Tillie was grateful for it. It meant that there was still time for Elan to get himself to safety.

It wasn't enough though, and as the earth started to shake more intensely, she saw larger and larger rocks starting to fall down the valley. Tillie screamed as one started coming towards her. She saw her life starting to flash before her eyes, and it rooted her to the spot. She didn't think that she could get out of here on her own.

Just as Tillie was contemplating how much pain the rocks were going to cause, she felt strong arms wrap around her shoving her out of the way and causing her to hit the ground hard. "Keep your eyes closed," the voice whispered, and she did just that. She didn't know what came next, and she wasn't sure that she did.

Tillie wasn't sure how long she had been on the ground. It felt like an eternity until the dust settled. Tillie knew that she wasn't dead. If she had been, she was sure that she wouldn't have been in as much pain as she currently was.

"Are you alright?" Tarak asked. He had been the one to pull her out of the way of the rockslide, and he had held her in his arms until the earthquake had subsided. She shivered at the feeling of his hard muscles pressing into her.

"I think so," Tillie said. She was disappointed as he got off from on top of her. She missed the feeling of his body on her own. The feeling of it had brought her comfort. Tarak reached

out a hand, and she placed her own in it, allowing him to pull her to her feet.

She moved her arms and legs, surprised that they were all working fine.

“You’re hurt,” Tarak said. He reached out and brushed a hand over her cheek. His fingers came away slightly covered in her blood.

Tillie pressed her hands to her own cheeks. “The smaller rocks must have cut me,” she said. Tillie hated that her vanity made her wonder if the cuts on her cheeks would scare, and she immediately hated herself for the thought, especially as she looked around.

“What happened?” she asked.

The Apache men were scattered everywhere. From what Tillie could see, at least two horses had been crushed by falling rocks, and the rest were nowhere to be found. The valley was littered with rock debris, but the worst was only a few feet from where Tillie had been standing before Tarak had grabbed her.

She breathed a sigh of relief. If Tarak hadn't saved her, she was sure that she would have been crushed by the falling rocks.

"That was an earthquake," Tarak said. "It's when the earth shifts."

Tillie wanted to roll her eyes. She wanted to remind him that she understood that considering the circumstances, but it didn't feel like the time for the two of them to be arguing, especially as Tillie looked at the pale faces of fear that she saw on the Apache men.

“We need to make sure that all the men are accounted for,” Tarak said. He pressed his fingers to her upper arm softly. She nodded. Her mind was replaying the last few minutes, and as she recalled Elan rushing toward her, she felt a small sliver of panic taking place in her chest.

“Elan!” she shouted. Her voice was one of many as the men started to find their friends. Tillie felt her heart pounding in her chest as she continued calling Elan’s name. She walked towards one of his friends. A boy who was a few years older and always seemed less fearful of her than others were.

“Have you seen Elan?” she asked. The boy’s eyes were wide as he shook his head. Tillie could tell that the earthquake had upset him.

She placed a soft hand on his arm. “You should go to Tarak and the others. They will

want to know that you are safe."

The boy nodded. It was almost as if her were in a fog as he walked towards the group of men who were starting to gather.

Tillie kept walking, though. She had to find Elan. It was the singularly most important thing that she needed.

"Elan!" Tillie yelled. She was sure that he could hear her. The clearing was not that large, and she was sure that she was being loud enough for the young boy to hear her.

Tillie tried screaming again. "Elan!" she shouted with all of her might, hoping to see his sweet face pop up near here with a well-timed joke.

But Tillie didn't see Elan. Instead, as she walked closer to the landslide, she heard a low groan.

Walking towards the rocks, Tillie felt her mouth becoming dry as she shakily looked down at the rocks. There was a small trickle of blood on the ground, and Tillie had to do her best to stifle a sob as she knelt down next to the outcropping.

You don't know if it's Elan, she thought to herself. For a moment, the thoughts that were swirling in her mind froze her body.

Another groan caught her attention, and it lit a fire in her body. It didn't matter if it was Elan or someone else, there was someone under the rocks who needed her help. Tillie reached down and started pulling the rocks off the groaning body.

They were heavy, and she could barely lift up the rocks that were on top of the body. “Help!” she yelled. She was trying to move some of the larger rocks. She could see a small hand, but there were too many rocks covering the person, and she couldn’t see their face.

“What’s wrong,” Tarak asked. He was by her side before she could call for help again.

“Someone is trapped under here,” she said.

Tarak released a low whistle, and several men came to help them move the rocks. As they started moving the rocks, the face of a young boy became evident.

“Elan,” she called out. Tillie reached out and cupped the young boy’s face. For a moment,

she was worried that he was dead, and she felt a scream making its way to the edge of her voice. The grief that she felt was all-consuming, and she couldn't focus on how quickly the men were moving the rocks from Elan's body.

Then, he coughed, and Tillie released a small sob of relief. Elan was alive.

Chapter 28

Tarak felt ill as he looked at Elan. The rocks hadn't crushed the boy's body or face, at least from what Tarak could see.

"We have to get him out of here," Tillie said.

"You need to stay back," Tarak said. He didn't mean for his voice to have so much bite, but it did. He was trying not to panic as he looked at the boy's small body. He had never realized that Elan was so small.

He looked at Tillie's face, and he could see that she was on the verge of tears. He wanted to gather her in his arms, but he couldn't. He needed to focus on Elan. He wasn't sure how much damage the rockslide had done to the

boy, and he prayed to the ancestors that he wasn't going to die.

"Tillie…" a soft voice called.

All of the men who were trying to get the rocks off of Elan's small body stopped what they were doing. Tarak felt a sigh of relief as he looked at Elan's face. His dark eyes were open, which Tarak took as a good sign.

"I'm here," Tillie said. She was kneeling down, cradling Elan's cheek in her hand. She was smart not to have picked up the boy's head.

"I saved you," Elan said. His voice was weak, but it was a good sign that he was talking. As Tarak looked at him, he was also glad that he didn't see any blood coming out of the boy's mouth or nose.

“You did,” Tillie said. “You were very brave and very foolish.”

Tarak looked at Elan, and as a smile spread over the boy’s face, he knew that he was going to be okay.

“Get him to stay still,” he told Tillie.

Tillie nodded before turning back to Elan. “You need to stay still,” she said. “You got caught in a rockslide.”

“Yeah,” Elan said. “I can see that.”

Tillie laughed, but Tarak could hear the worry in her voice. “Does anything hurt?” she asked

Elan.

“Everything,” he told her.

“I suppose that that’s a good thing,” she said. “If you can feel pain, then you can feel all of your limbs.”

Tarak didn’t know if it was a good thing. There was blood coming from somewhere, and if it wasn’t from Elan then Tarak wasn’t sure who it was from.

“Work faster,” he whispered to the men who were closest to him. They nodded, and they started moving the rocks quicker and quicker. There was a sense of quiet urgency among the men, and Tarak was grateful for that. He wanted to keep Elan calm, and he also wanted to make sure that he was getting Elan free as soon as he could.

“You shouldn’t have come toward me,” Tillie scolded. “You could have been killed.”

“You would have been killed if I hadn’t gotten your attention,” Elan said.

Tarak heard Tillie released a loud sigh, and he suspected that it was because she knew that Elan was right. All of this made Tarak work harder to free the boy, especially as he considered how it was Tarak’s fault that he was under the rocks to begin with.

“Well,” Tillie said. “When you get free, I will have to find some way to thank you.”

Tarak couldn’t see the boy’s face, but he knew that he was beaming. Elan had proven how

much he cared for Tillie by nearly sacrificing his life for her. Tarak was in awe of the boy. It showed great bravery and spirit to do such a thing.

“I think we are even,” he told her. “You saved me from being eaten by the coyotes.”

Tillie said nothing, but as Tarak looked back at her, he watched as she stroked Elan’s cheek. He was smiling at her as though she had hung the moon, and Tarak had to try and suppress a chuckle. He knew that look all too well.

“Elan,” Tarak said. “We are going to move the last rock from your arms. you need to stay on the ground until the healer can come and take a look at you.”

Elan’s nose wrinkled. “I feel okay.”

Tarak's eyebrow rose. "You aren't fine," he said. "You are lucky. Tillie was right. You could have been killed."

"I feel okay now that you freed me," Elan said.

"And I'll feel better when the healer comes to take a look at you," Tarak said. He still couldn't believe the fact that Elan appeared to be okay. From what he could see of the boy, he was banged up. He was going to feel the pain of riding a horse for the next few weeks, but nothing looks to be bleeding, which was practically miraculous.

"Tarak's right," Tillie said. "We need the healer to take a look at you before you get up. It's just a precaution."

Elan said nothing, but Tarak was sure that he was going to stay put. The boy would do anything for Tillie.

“My mother’s going to kill me when she finds out about this,” Elan said under his breath.

Tarak and the men chuckled as they heaved the last rock from Elan’s body. They all breathed a sigh of relief when they realized that the boy had indeed sustained very little injury to his body.

“Move out of the way,” the healer said. “Allow me to look at the boy.”

Tarak rolled his eyes. The healer was practically shoving them to get near Elan. If there was an emergency, then Tarak could understand his haste, but he was starting to realize that the healer only cared to do his job

when he was getting something out of it. And now, he had the chance to thrust Tillie out of the way.

“Move,” he told her. “I need to examine the boy.”

Tillie looked like she wanted to argue, but as Tarak’s eyes collided with hers, he shook his head slightly. The healer wasn’t the best at his job, something that Tarak would have to mention to the tribe’s elder healer, but he was all that they had at the moment.

“Is he all right?” Tillie asked. She was wringing her hands as she looked on as the healer examined Elan.

“I’m fine,” Elan said.

“Where’s all the blood coming from?” Tarak asked.

“Blood?” Elan asked. He jumped up from his prostration so quickly that Tarak thought that he had gotten a snake bite on his behind. Elan looked around his body. His back was covered with blood.

“Oh, my goodness,” Tillie said. She rushed forward, but Tarak grabbed her. He knew that that blood did not belong to Elan.

“I’m fine,” Elan said, but his face fell as he saw a thin, white hoof sticking out from the shifted rocks.

“My horse,” he whispered.

Tarak closed his eyes. Elan had the ancestors on his side. His horse had taken the brunt of the damage of the rocks. His body likely had slowed the fall of the debris, making it possible for Elan to survive.

Elan," Tillie said. She reached out to the boy, who looked devastated.

"My brother gave me that horse for the journey," he said. His bottom lip was trembling as he looked at the dead horse. Tarak felt terrible. He was glad that Elan was alive, but he knew that he was likely upset that an animal he was so attached to was dead.

"This is what I've been trying to tell all of you," a deep voice boomed out.

Tarak closed his eyes. He hadn't spent much time thinking about where his cousin had gotten off to. Once the rocks had cleared, he had looked to make sure that Taza was alright, and then, he had started looking for any others who might have been injured.

"This woman brings nothing but death to those around her!" Chalipun was standing slightly in front of the group. His hands were spread wide as he circled the group. There was something predatory about his actions, and Tarak felt his hands straying towards the belt that housed his axe and knives.

"Stop it," Tarak said. "Now, is not the time." The earth had shaken, which scared a great many of the men who had never felt an earthquake before. Plus, there was Elan to think about. The boy had gone through quite an ordeal, and he needed time.

"You see this!" Chalipun yelled. Tarak's words

hadn’t even dented Chalipun’s mania. “She has somehow taken one of our best warriors and twisted his mind against us.”

Tarak opened his mouth to say something, but Tillie stepped forward. “You are out of line,” she said. “There are people here who are hurt and scared, and instead of helping them, you are just standing here spewing hatred.”

Chalipun looked as though he wanted nothing more than to throttle Tillie, and Tarak felt himself walking forward so that he was standing in front of Tillie.

“Ever since you have come to us, terrible things have happened,” Chalipun said. “This earthquake was a sign from the ancestors! If we ignore it, we don’t know what could possibly happen next.”

There was a murmur of agreement that worried Tarak. The earthquake had scared many of the men. Tarak recalled the first time he had felt one, and he, too, had been sure that he was being punished for something.

“The ancestors nearly took one of our youngest, just to teach us!” Chalipun yelled. “What is it going to take for us to finally listen to them? Who is going to have to die?”

“Tillie didn’t cause any of this,” Elan said. “It was…” he trailed off. It was clear that Elan didn’t know what had caused the Earth to move, but he was standing there looking as though he would gladly go against Chalipun in order to protect Tillie.

“You are naïve,” Chalipun said. “You’ve been lucky to not have to live through the destruction that her people have wrought on us.”

Elan looked as though he were about to argue, but before he could say anything, Taza jumped in between the two of them. “Enough!” he yelled.

All of the men looked around, and Tarak knew that they were slightly concerned about Taza’s tone. He never spoke to the tribe in anger. It was one of his better traits.

“That’s enough, Chalipun,” Taza said.

But Chalipun wasn’t willing to back down. He felt as though he had the backing of the tribe, but as Tarak looked around, he wasn’t sure if there were as many men willing to fall behind Chalipun as he felt.

It was one thing to grumble about the chief. It

was another thing to go about against the chief.

“You aren’t fit to be chief,” Chalipun said. He spit at Taza’s shoes. “Your father would be ashamed of you! He would have killed her where she stood when he first saw her.”

Tarak didn’t believe that. Not for one moment. Despite everything, Tarak was sure that his father would never have killed a defenseless woman who had been set upon by bandits.

Taza had had enough. Tarak could see the moment that he was shifting. He was no longer allowing himself to be the mediator. He was starting to see what Tarak had been warning him of all along. Chalipun had become a danger to the tribe and to himself.

“Take back your words,” Taza said.

“Apologize, and I will forgive your insolence.”

Chalipun snorted slightly. “I will not allow your weakness to destroy us,” Chalipun sneered.

Tarak suspected that that was the last of Taza’s patience. He looked at Tarak, who had moved towards Chalipun. Tarak had been itching to fight his cousin since he nearly hit Tillie. Unfortunately, he didn’t get a chance. Before he and Chalipun could face off with one another, Chalipun fell like a sack.

“We should probably tie him up,” Bipin said. He was standing behind Chalipun, his axe handle still slightly in the air. Bipin had knocked Chalipun out.

“I suspect that you wanted him to cool down,” he said to Taza. “Thought this would be the

best way to ensure that no further blood is shed."

Taza nodded. He looked over at two of his closest men. "Tie him up," he said. "He needs time to think about the things that he was saying."

Tarak was shocked by everything that was happening, but he quickly gathered his wits about him.

"Gather the remaining horses and supplies!" Tarak yelled. "We move out as soon as possible."

No one said anything, but everyone got moving. Tarak pressed a tired hand over his face. Even though Chalipun was in the process of getting hog-tied across a horse, Tarak couldn't stop the low sigh that came out from

between his lips.

He wanted to believe that this was the end of things and that they would soon be making it to their home, but he couldn't help but feel as though this was simply the beginning. Even though it killed him, he knew that he needed to get Tillie back to her home as soon as possible.

The longer that she stayed with them, the more danger she was in, and Tarak had already promised her that he wasn't going to allow anything to happen to her, and he meant that.

Chapter 29

Tillie stifled a yawn. It was nearly dusk, but they hadn't stopped. According to Tarak, they would be riding through most of the night. The men were desperate to get to Arizona, so no one complained, even though everyone was desperately tired from the events of the night. Tillie understood the need to ride as quickly as possible, but she couldn't keep her eyes from drooping slightly.

"Are you all right?" Tarak asked. His warm body was pressed against hers, which wasn't helping her to stay awake. Because of the earthquake, they had lost more than half of the horses, so they had to double up riders. Tarak had made it clear that Tillie would be riding with him and that he would broker no arguments about it.

Tillie was fine with it. After the events of the day, she needed the comfort that Tarak could provide.

“I’m fine,” Tillie said. She wanted to lay her head on his shoulder. She knew that he would allow her to fall asleep in the saddle, but it didn’t seem fair for her to sleep whenever everyone else was unable.

“You should get some rest. It’s been an eventful day,” Tarak said.

Tillie snorted. As she looked over at Elan, who was wincing as the horse he was riding hit a rough patch of the trail. Not too far away from him was a horse that carried Chalipun. When he’d been knocked out, they had thrust him across the saddle, but now that he was awake, he was riding, with his hands tied around the pommel of his saddle.

“I think that that is an understatement,” she said. “Every day with the Apache has been extremely eventful.”

Tarak laughed slightly, and Tillie could feel the rumbling of it across her back. She shivered. Tarak’s arms were around her waist, but she was sure that she could feel the heat of him through her clothing. Having Tarak so close was nice. Despite everything that was going on, being able to be so close to Tarak felt like a secret treat.

Tarak suddenly became quiet, and Tillie knew that whatever had come into his head had made him stiffen up.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked. Tillie knew that sometimes she needed to press when it came to Tarak. He didn’t like to express himself too openly. When he did, it was a treat, almost like when her father would bring her back some chocolates from his travels.

“Time to dismount!” Taza yelled.

This time Tillie stiffened. Despite her tiredness, she felt safer riding with Tarak. Too much had happened over the past few weeks, and her feelings of safety weren’t what they had been before her travels.

“I thought we were riding through the night?” she asked. She was confused by the fact that they were dismounting so soon.

“We are,” Tarak said. “But we need to make sure that the horses are well watered and well-fed. We can’t risk losing any more.”

That made sense to Tillie. Plus, as she looked around, she saw that a great many of the men appeared exhausted. As their feet hit the ground, they seemed to be world-weary.

“Come with me,” Tarak said. Tillie had dismounted, and she was glad to have the opportunity to stretch her legs.

“Where are we going?” Tillie asked. Her legs were stiff, so it felt good to walk towards the edge of the small pond where everyone was taking their horses to be watered.

“I just want to make sure that you are close to

me," he said.

His words caused a hot heat to spread across the middle of Tillie's chest. She would never openly admit it, but she liked the possessiveness that Tarak was showing towards her. It made her feel safe in a way that she hadn't in a long time, maybe ever.

"We should be at your father's land by the end of the day tomorrow," he said. Those words were like a bucket of ice water being thrown on her. She was glad that she would be heading home, to some extent, but she knew that when she was safely ensconced back in her father's home, she wouldn't be seeing Tarak or Elan again.

The boy's laughter drew her attention. He was traveling with Bipin, and his recent brush with death had made him very popular among the boys his age.

“Is that what you were thinking about when we were riding?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You stiffened,” she said. “You always do that when you are worried about something.”

Tarak laughed slightly, but it was devoid of any sort of mirth. It was more sardonic than anything else. Tillie couldn’t understand why he was so worried. After the earthquake, Taza took leadership of the tribe in a way that he hadn’t. Chalipun was taken care of, and though Tillie didn’t think that all the Apache’s problems were taken care of, she didn’t think that there was a lot of reason for them to be upset.

“I’m sorry,” Tarak said after a few moments. His words surprised Tillie. She hadn’t expected that he would apologize to her, especially since she wasn’t sure what he was apologizing to her for.

“For what?” Tillie asked. She couldn’t understand what Tarak had to be sorry for. Tillie was sure that she wouldn’t be alive today if it wasn’t for Tarak.

“The Apache haven’t been as welcoming to you as they should have been,” he said. Tillie winced. That was the truth of things, but she couldn’t hold it against Tarak anymore than she wanted him to hold the actions of her people against her. There were things that neither of them could control, and the way other people treated them was one of those things.

“I don’t hold any of that against you,” she said. “Besides, the Apache have kept me safe,

and now, they are going to get me home. I don't think that I could ask for anything other than that."

Tarak gave her a soft smile, which was illuminated by the moonlight. Once more, Tillie was taken aback by his handsomeness, and before she could stop herself, she reached out and cupped his cheek. His skin was rough from the sun, and there was a slight stubble of hair on his skin.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Tarak whispered. They were so close now that Tillie could smell the sage that always seemed to permeate his skin. She could see the darkness of his eyes and the small wrinkles that creased them at the edges.

"I know," Tillie said. She went to back away from Tarak, but he reached out and snagged her by the wrist.

“Don’t,” he said.

Tillie felt her cheeks starting to fill with a heated blush. “Anyone can see,” she said.

Most of the men were standing at the other end of the pond, not paying the two of them any attention. Tillie looked around. She didn’t see Taza, but that wasn’t unsurprising. As chief, he was likely meeting with some of his other men to ensure that the remainder of their journey would go smoothly. Tillie suspected that Tarak would normally be one of those men.

“I don’t care,” Tarak said. She could tell from the tone of his voice that he actually didn’t care.

“Tarak…” Tillie’s voice was oddly breathy, and she felt the bottom of her stomach clench. She reached out with her other hand and cupped the other side of his face. Before she could stop herself, she pressed her lips to his. It was just supposed to be a soft kiss, but before she could stop herself, Tarak pressed a hand to her lower back and pressed her forward slightly.

Tillie closed her eyes as Tarak pulled her near. She sighed slightly. Tarak didn’t pull away from her, and she was grateful for that. The warmth of his body felt delicious and much more different than when they were close on the horse.

“I don’t want you to leave me,” Tarak said. There was a vulnerability in his voice that Tillie hadn’t expected.

“What do you mean?”

Tarak released her waist and moved one of her curls from her face. As he was doing so, his fingertips brushed against her cheeks, and she shivered.

“I can’t think about what it means not to see you every day,” he said.

His words made her weak because she also couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to not see Tarak every day. It had only been a few weeks, but she had come to rely on Tarak in a way that she’d never relied on anyone before. The thought of never seeing him again made her feel ill.

“The Apache aren’t too far from my father’s ranch,” she said. “I’m sure…” As she caught sight of Tarak’s face, she cut off her words. She knew that what she was saying was ridiculous for more than one reason.

Tarak got quiet just as Tillie did. The two of them started looking out of the pond contemplating the feelings that they had for one another.

“Do you think that your father will let you stay home for a while?” Tarak asked. There was a gruffness to his voice as he spoke, and Tillie suspected that she knew why. Tarak was thinking about her upcoming nuptials.

“I don’t know,” Tillie said, honestly. She prayed that the fear that she had been killed on the road would make her father want to keep her close by, but she wasn’t sure. She had never thought that her father would want to marry her to a man she didn’t love, but he had done that as well.

“What will you do when you return home?”

Tillie asked. She had wondered what the Apache did when they weren't traveling. She didn't know if they had businesses to support or land to take care of.

"I'm not certain," Tarak said. "I suppose that depends on the outcome of Taza's conversation with your father."

Tillie sighed. She didn't think that that conversation was going to go well. Something in her stomach made her think that all of the bad things that had happened weren't over just yet. She prayed that they would finally be able to have peace at some point.

"Let's not talk about this anymore," Tillie said.

She reached out and grabbed Tarak's hand. "Let's just enjoy these last few moments together."

Tarak said nothing. They simply stood at the pond's edge, holding each other and praying for a future that neither of them could have.

Chapter 30

Tarak could feel Tillie stifling a yawn. He frowned. He had suggested that she catch a bit of sleep in the saddle throughout the night, but she had refused. He assumed it was because the jolting of the ride wasn't conducive to sleeping unless you were an Apache.

Tarak repressed a smile as he remembered being a young boy who had fallen asleep in his father's arms after an all-day, all-night ride.

They had taken a few small breaks for the benefit of the horses, and to give the riders a bit of rest, but Taza was determined to get to Tubac before nightfall. Tarak felt a clenching in his stomach as he thought about what that meant for him and Tillie.

They had briefly spoken about the future last night, and though neither of them expressed it aloud, Tarak knew that these last few hours would likely be the last ones they spent together.

“Only a few more miles,” Tarak said. He wasn’t sure how Tillie felt about heading home. He knew that things with her father hadn’t been well when she had left. He felt his stomach clench as he considered why that was.

“Thank goodness, “Tillie said. “I think I lost sensation in my legs since the last time we stopped.”

Tarak smiled. One thing that he was going to miss about Tillie was her open humor. He didn’t think that he knew another woman who was so openly funny. In truth, he didn’t know

anyone who was like Tillie. She was wholly unique.

“I’m sure that you’ll be excited to see your home,” Tarak said. He didn’t know why he insisted on digging the knife that seemed to have been shoved into his gut even further. If he was smart, he would have ridden in silence.

“I’ll be happy to see my bed,” Tillie said. “I don’t think I ever fully appreciated it until recently.”

Tarak smiled once more. Tillie’s body was pressed against his, and he enjoyed the smell of her hair as strands of it tickled the bottom of his chin.

“But I don’t think that I have missed much else,” she told him. She turned slightly so that he could see the profile of her face. “Is that

terrible?” she asked him.

Tarak didn’t think so. In fact, he understood what she was saying. He would be happy to return to the larger tribe, but he enjoyed being on the road. It was what the Apache were built for.

He wondered if he would have always felt the same way if he had someone like Tillie waiting for him to return home. He knew that many of the men hated leaving their wives and children, and until recently, Tarak hadn’t understood why.

“I understand,” Tarak said.

Tillie breathed a sigh, and she snuggled further into Tarak’s chest. He knew that the men were questioning their closeness, but he didn’t care. As he looked over at Chalipun,

who was still tied to the pommel of his saddle and looked as though he had eaten a rotten piece of meat, Tarak felt a shiver race down his spine.

He wanted to believe that all of their problems would be solved now that his brother had finally taken action against their cousin, but he suspected that this was just the beginning of a fissure between his people.

“What are you thinking?” Tillie asked.

Tarak didn’t want to share his concerns with Tillie. After all, in a few hours, they wouldn’t matter to her anyway. She would never see Chalipun again. If she ever came across another Apache, it would likely only be in passing, and remind her of this mad time in her life.

But Tillie was the only person that Tarak could take to. When he had tried to raise his concerns with his brother, Taza had brushed them off. Since the earthquake, Tarak hadn't been able to get more than a few minutes alone with him. He claimed that he was preparing to meet with Tillie's father, but Tarak wasn't sure that he believed that.

"I'm worried about what is happening to the tribe," Tarak told her. He didn't want to burden their last few hours together, but he wanted Tillie's opinion about what could possibly happen next. After all, a great many things could change, depending on how her father reacted to the Apache.

"Because of Chalipun?" Tillie asked. He felt her shiver against his body. Though she had pretended to not fear Chalipun, Tarak knew that his words and escalating violence had upset her greatly.

“Because of what Taza plans to do,” Tarak told her.

Tillie sighed.

“Do you think your father would be open to helping to broker peace with the Apache?” he asked. It was a question that Tarak had asked her before, and she’d always been hesitant to give him a firm answer. Tarak wasn’t surprised by that.

“I don’t know,” Tillie said again. “I used to think that he would be willing to hear anyone who might have a claim to make, but I’m not sure how he feels about the Apache. He’s never spoken much about them to me.”

Tarak nodded. “Do you think that he might think kindly about us, given that we’ve helped to get you home?”

Tarak did not want to leverage his relationship with Tillie, even for the gain of his tribe, but he couldn't help but wonder if getting her home safely really was the key to broker peace between the Apache and Tillie's people.

Tillie shrugged slightly. "I suppose he might," she said. "But I honestly can't say. I always thought that my father and I were close and that I knew what he would do about certain things, but now, I'm not so sure."

"Because he wanted to marry you to that man in California?" he asked. Though Tarak had certain responsibilities to the tribe, he was never going to be forced to marry someone whom he didn't love, let alone someone he had never met.

And that wasn't just a rule for him as a man,

but also for the entire tribe. None of the women would be forced to marry men they didn't love or know. Even when the Apache had brokered marriages outside of the tribe, the chief was tasked with making sure that the union worked for all parties involved.

"Partially," Tillie said. "I think it was more the knowledge that my opinion meant nothing to my father. He saw an opportunity to further his business, and he took it."

Tarak said nothing as he thought through Tillie's words. He couldn't understand a father using his children for his own gain. Tarak had been extremely lucky. His father had allowed him and Taza to be their own people. Though they had specific duties towards the tribe, for most of their early lives, they were allowed to be children.

He wondered if Tillie had ever been just a child to her father or if she had always been a

pawn for him to amass more riches.

“I don’t agree with Chalipun,” Tarak said slowly.

“What?” Tillie asked.

Tarak sighed. He knew that he shouldn’t speak against Tillie’s father, but he couldn’t stop himself. He could feel anger manifesting toward her father as he thought about how he had risked his daughter’s life for more gold.

“I don’t agree with Chalipun that your people are all evil,” he told her.

“But?” she asked.

Tarak breathed in sharply. “But I think that the desire for gold, for more and more of it, has corrupted your people.”

Tillie stiffened in his arms, and Tarak regretted saying what he did about her father. “I think that you might be right,” she said. Her voice was very soft. “I always thought that my father would choose me over his business, but I guess that I was wrong.”

Tarak felt a drip of water fall onto his hand. He immediately knew that Tillie was crying. He pulled her closer to his body and wrapped his arms more firmly around her. He didn’t care who saw or what they thought.

Tarak was loyal to the tribe and his people, but he had also developed a loyalty to Tillie. If things were different, and if Tarak didn’t know that Tillie needed to go back to her home to be safe, he would have proposed marriage to

her.

The knowledge of that almost stopped him short. He hadn't realized the true depths of his feelings for Tillie until they got closer and closer to being separated.

But Tarak knew that things weren't that simple between them. Tillie had been in danger just traveling with them. Though some of the accidents that had befallen them had been just that, accidents. Tarak couldn't forget that his cousin had tried to kill her more than once. He couldn't imagine what might happen if he married her.

"I'm sure that your father loves you," Tarak said. He didn't know what he was supposed to say. He wanted to comfort Tillie, but he didn't know how.

“Let’s not talk about my father anymore,” she said. “Especially because I think that he’s the least important obstacle between Taza and my people brokering any sort of peace.”

“What do you mean?” Tarak asked. Though he suspected that he knew what she meant, he wanted to be sure.

“Chalipun wasn’t the only person who saw me as a harbinger or as something terrible coming for the tribe,” she said.

“I’m aware. Though I don’t think that most of them are as angry about your presence as Chalipun was.”

Tillie released a small snort of derision. He knew that she did not believe him. She had told him time and time again that she felt like no matter what she did that his people would

never accept and trust her. Tarak didn't agree. Chalipun had riled some of the men up, but he knew that most of them were good people. They were men he had fought with in battle.

"I think that Taza is going to have a bunch of distrustful people on his hands when the rest of the tribe learns that he tried to broker any sort of peace without consulting them," she said.

Tarak nodded in agreement. Bipin had told him as much. The Apache had no reason to trust Tillie's people, considering what they had done to one another in the past, and though Tarak knew that his brother believed that peace would benefit all of their people, Tarak wasn't so sure.

"I suppose that we will see what the future holds," Tarak said. He didn't want to speak out against his brother, but he couldn't ignore the sage wisdom in Tillie's words. Tarak knew

that there were a great many obstacles standing in his brother's way, and he hoped that Taza had a plan to address all of these things.

Something told Tarak that his brother didn't have any plan. He sighed and tightened his arms around Tillie. He didn't want to think too much about whatever was going to happen next. He wanted to enjoy the last bit of time that the two of them had together.

"We are getting closer," Tillie said.

Tarak nodded. He suspected that they would be getting into the town long before sunrise. And no matter how much he wanted to draw this time out, he knew that soon, he would have to give Tillie up. He would go back to being the brother of the Apache chief, and she would be forced off to marry a man she didn't love.

Tarak didn’t know what would come next, but everything that he could imagine felt wholly unfair to them.

Chapter 31

The moment Tillie saw Tubac in the distance, she felt an odd sensation forming in her chest. She was worried about what would happen when their group rode through the town, which is what they would need to do in order to get to her father's ranch. She worried that they would be stopped by angry townspeople before they could make it.

Tillie was half asleep, but she noticed that some of the men were starting to veer off from the main group.

"What's happening?" Tillie asked Tarak. He had been quiet for the last hour of their ride. She wondered if it was because he was as nervous as she felt. They had spent the morning and night discussing Tubac, her father, and his brother.

“We don’t want to worry any of the townsfolk, so it’ll just be a small group of us returning you to your father’s home,” he said.

Tillie nodded. Though he couldn’t see her, she understood the sentiment. It made sense. She hadn’t spent much time in the town, as her father’s ranch was just outside the town, but she suspected that a large group of the Apache riding through might make people nervous.

“Where are they going?” Tillie asked. She didn’t like not knowing what was happening. It was clear that whatever decisions had been made, they were made long before they had gotten close to Tubac.

“I didn’t get to say goodbye,” Tillie whispered. As she looked at the small group of men that remained with them. That group did not

contain Bipin or Elan—the only two people besides Tarak who had shown her any kindness. She knew that she would never see them again, and her heart ached at the thought.

“I’ll make sure they know,” Tarak said.

Tillie felt tears filling her eyes as they got closer and closer to the town. She didn’t want to say anything, but she felt gutted as they started to get close to her father’s home.

“Do you think that your father is in town?” Tarak asked.

Tillie shook her head. “I doubt it,” she said. It was a few hours before dusk, and she was sure that her father was on the ranch. Even with her missing, he still had a ranch to run, and by this time, he would be finishing up for the

evening.

Her father was a creature of habit. Once he checked the evening work, he would clean up, have his supper, and then, he would have a nightly drink before retiring to bed. Tillie wondered if his routine stayed the same or if things had changed because she had gone missing.

She knew that her father was likely worried about her, probably thought she was dead, but she also couldn't imagine things being any different for him.

"He's probably getting ready to have supper soon," she told Tarak.

He said nothing, but she could feel him tense as they started riding through the edge of town. There were only five Apache that she

could count.

As they rode through the town, Tillie felt herself stiffen as well. People were looking at them and whispering. She knew that most of the people, if not all of them, had no idea who she was.

Through Tillie had friends in town, some of the daughters from prominent families, she wasn't usually off her father's ranch.

"Do you think anyone recognizes you?" Tarak asked.

Tillie looked into the small crowd that had gathered around on the road. "I don't recognize anyone," she said. It was the truth. She didn't notice any familiar faces in the crowd.

“Do you think that they will stop us from getting through?” Tillie asked. She knew that there were people in Tubac who did not agree like the Apache. She had heard about them in church, but she didn’t think that the people of Tubac were violent.

“I’m not sure,” Tarak said. “We haven’t always had good relations with your people, especially the ones in Tubac,” he told her.

Tillie sighed. She thought that it was incredibly silly that things were so bad between her people and the Apache. She knew that the Apache weren’t all bad, just as she knew that her people weren’t all good. Tillie felt that the focus should be on a person’s character and not on what group they had been born into.

“We didn’t want to draw too much attention

to ourselves," Tarak said.

Tillie snorted. "If that was what you wanted, then I hardly think that you succeeded."

Tillie looked forward to where Taza was riding in front. He was flanked by the two men who always seemed to be near him. They were big, burly Apache with long braids and knives at their belts. Tillie hadn't heard them speak in more than a grunt.

"I don't think that you picked the right group for that," she told Taza.

She was sure that he was smiling as he always did. "I think it had less to do with us and more to do with you," he said.

Tillie furrowed her brow. “What have I done?” she asked. She was wearing an old dress that had seen better days. Her blond hair was in a matted braid, and she was sure that there was dirt and dust covering her face. Even if she had seen someone she knew, she was sure that they wouldn’t have recognized her.

“They are probably wondering if we’ve kidnaped you,” he said.

Tillie stiffened. She hadn’t thought about that. She assumed that people would take one look at her and realize that she was with the Apache. After all, she was sitting in the saddle with Tarak.

Now, she realized that from her look, she probably looked like she had been dragged through the desert.

“We need to get to my father as soon as possible,” Tillie said. She didn’t want any sort of gossip from the town to get back to her father before she had a chance to speak to him.

Tarak said nothing, but she felt him signal to their horse that he should pick up the pace slightly. It was clear to her that the Apache wanted out of Tubac just as much as the people clearly wanted them gone.

Tillie shook her head at the irony.

“We are almost at the edge of town,” she said. Tubac wasn’t very big. If you stayed on the main street, then you could make it out of the town in just a short jaunt on the horse. Tillie was stiff as they got to the edge of town. Her father’s ranch was only another few miles away, and she was sure that they would be able to get there in just a blink of an eye.

The thought made her stomach clench once more. She'd be home soon, and she still wasn't sure what she was going to do about all of that.

"This is your father's home?" Tarak asked as they came to the edge of the ranch.

Tillie could barely speak. Instead, she nodded slightly as she took in the familiarity of the ranch. The Apache had stopped at the gate, which needed a good painting.

Tillie had been away from home in weeks, and it felt odd that nothing had changed. The house looked exactly the same.

“I should go up to the door first,” she said. “I’m not sure how my father will react,” she said.

Just as the words left her mouth, she saw one of her father’s men rushing towards them. He was holding a shotgun, and Tillie’s eyes widened as she looked at the barrel of the gun.

“Get off this property,” the man said.

Tillie didn’t recognize him. He must have been a new worker. Tillie felt her grief resurface as she recalled that her father was at least two men short. She hadn’t thought about Henry or James lately. Too much had been going on but being at home reminded her of them. It also reminded her that one of her father’s men had betrayed them.

“We come here in peace,” Taza said. “To return something that belongs to you.”

Tillie felt her nose wrinkle at his words. She didn’t like the idea that Taza viewed her as her father’s property. She knew that her father saw her that way, but she didn’t think that the Apache would think of her in the same way.

“We don’t want your peace,” her father’s deep voice boomed. “The Apache have nothing I want. You need to get off my land before he’s forced to use that thing.”

Tillie looked over at her father. She was slightly hidden from view by Taza’s large form. Tillie took a moment to examine her father. For the most part, he looked the same, but there were also dark circles under his eyes. Tillie wondered if she was the reason for his sleepless nights.

“We don’t want any problems,” Taza said. “We want to talk.”

Tillie could see her father’s face, and he was getting angry with Taza’s refusal. She knew that she had to step forward before this situation got worse, but something was holding her back.

When her father’s man cocked his gun, she knew that she didn’t have time to think about her actions any longer. She had to act.

“You need to listen to them, Pa,” Tillie said. Her father’s head snapped towards her. Her form was still covered by Taza’s large form. He started moving his horse slightly, so that her form was visible to her father.

“Tillie?” he asked. His voice was shocked as he took in her form.

Tillie nodded. “It’s me.”

She didn’t know what she expected. Tears of joy, maybe. Some sort of physical affection, but instead, her father looked as though he couldn’t believe that she was sitting on a horse right before his eyes.

She was sure that her father could barely recognize her. Tillie had been on the road for weeks. And even before she was taken in by the Apache, she had been struggling on the road with lack of sleep and lack of food.

Tarak jumped off the back of the horse and reached out a hand so that he could help her off the horse.

“Wha…” her father seemed stunned to see her. “When I heard that you never made it, I thought that you were…” he trailed off. Tillie felt anger starting to form in her chest as his words penetrated her mind.

Her father’s shock went away just as quickly as it had arrived, and he turned to Taza and Tarak, both of whom had jumped off their horses. “You!” he sneered. He grabbed a gun from his belt and leveled it Tarak. “What have you done to my daughter.”

“They did nothing!” Tillie yelled out. She jumped in front of Tarak, ready to shield him with her body if she needed to. “They saved my life.”

Her father didn’t drop his gun, but he did seem to be reconsidering his assumptions.

“What?” he asked her once more.

“Bandits overtook the stagecoach. There were too many of them. James and Henry…” Tillie felt herself starting to choke up as she thought about her friends. She prayed that wherever their souls went, they were able to find peace.

“Your men are all dead,” Tarak said. His hands cupped her shoulders, and she allowed the warmth of him to soothe her grief. Her father didn’t miss the action, and his eyes narrowed as he looked at her and Tarak’s closeness.

“Did they want the gold?” her father asked.

Tillie’s heart froze. “I have the gold,” she said. She jangled the small bag that sat on her hip. “None of it has been spent.”

Her father said nothing, but he walked closer towards her. “I don’t understand.”

“The Apache saved me,” she said. “If Taza and his tribe hadn’t protected me, I wouldn’t be here before you.”

Of that, Tillie was certain.

Her father said nothing. His eyes went between Taza, Tarak, and the other Apache men. It was clear that he didn’t know what to say.

Tillie held her breath as she waited for whatever her father would do next.

“I suppose I should thank you,” he said.

Taza bowed slightly, and Tillie felt her stomach clench. She knew what was coming next. He was going to ask her father about brokering peace, and she wasn't sure how he would react. She had prayed that she would have time to talk to him before Taza made his argument. But it was looking like that wasn't going to be the case.

"I was hoping that we might talk," Taza said.

Her father's narrowed, and Tillie felt her stomach clench in fear. Her father's man still had his gun trained on the Apache. It was almost as if he was scared to put it down. Tillie was scared of what might happen if he didn't.

"Is it money that you want?" her father asked.

Tillie felt the heavy weight of the gold at her hip.

“No,” Taza said.

“They don’t’ want gold, Pa,” Tillie said. “They didn’t take a single coin from my dowry.”

“Your dowry is intact?” her father asked. It was clear from the sound of his voice that he was shocked that the Apache hadn’t taken any money. She wasn’t surprised. They didn’t seem to need gold. From what she could tell, they were able to get most of what they needed from the land.

“It is,” she said. She walked towards her father. “Just hear them out. You owe it to them.”

She waited for a breath, unsure of what her father would say. She had never gotten involved in his business dealings before, and the one time she had requested something from him, he had flat out denied her.

His lips pursed, and she could tell that despite her miraculous appearance, this time was going to be no different. “Come back tomorrow,” he told Taza.

Tillie’s eye widened.

“Tomorrow?”

He nodded. “I want to speak to my daughter. I’m sure that you can understand that,” he said to Taza.

Tillie was surprised that her father would be willing to hear the Apache at all. It wasn't that she thought him to be a hateful man—her father would make a deal with the devil himself if he thought it beneficial—she was just shocked.

"I will return tomorrow, and we can speak further." Taza's words were incredibly formal, and Tillie suspected that he was nervous. It made her wonder if he thought he would get so far, or if he had expected to be turned away, or even shot before he could finish his petition.

Her father nodded. The action was more a jerk of his head than anything cordial, but it was enough to put Taza at ease.

"Come, Tillie," her father said. "We need to

get you in the house."

Tillie turned to look at Tarak, shock marring her features. She didn't know why she was shocked. It made sense that her father would want to speak with her. But she hadn't expected to not have time to say goodbye to Tarak.

She opened her mouth, unsure of what to say. She didn't think that she could say everything that Tarak meant to her.

"Tillie?" her father spoke. This time, his voice was soft, and she felt her father's warm hands on her shoulders. "Let's go inside," her father said.

He started turning her so that she was facing away from the Apache, away from Tarak.

Away from the future that she could never have had.

Chapter 32

Tarak kept telling himself that what had happened was for the best. Tillie's father had rushed her into the house as quickly as they had ridden through town. Tarak wanted to believe that it was because he was so happy to see his daughter alive and well, but something about Tillie's father made him suspect that he wanted her away from the tribe.

"We will go tomorrow at noon to talk to her father," Taza said. "We will keep it just the two of us to make him feel more comfortable."

Tarak didn't think that there was anything that his brother could do to make Tillie's father more amenable to what he was going to suggest.

“Have you talked to the tribe?” Tarak asked.

When they had arrived back home, Tarak had immediately gone to get a few hours of rest. He’d slept until the sun had fallen, and the smell of meat permeated the air.

“There’s nothing to talk about. At least there isn’t yet. Tillie’s father has agreed to nothing, and even if he does agree, I’m only asking him to help us.”

Tarak nodded. He had heard his brother multiple times, and he still found his plan difficult to understand. It was going to take a lot more than one man to broker any sort of treaty. Their father hadn’t been able to do it, and Tarak didn’t have faith that they would be either.

“What about Chalipun?” Tarak asked. He hadn’t seen his cousin since he had awoken.

Taza’s mouth thinned. Chalipun had become a sore spot for him. Taza had thought that they could simply ignore Chalipun’s radical thinking, and that they would be able to weather it until they returned home and sent Tillie on her way.

But they hadn’t. Chalipun had decided to engage in open rebellion, which was something that Tarak could not tolerate.

“What happened?” Tarak asked again.

The fire was playing against Taza’s face, and Tarak could see the lines of stress that marked him. The toll of the chiefdom was starting to show on Taza’s face.

“The elders decided that Chalipun was to be released.”

Tarak felt his mouth drop open. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. His brother was chief, but he knew that Taza respected the elders. If they said that Chalipun should be freed, then Taza would respect his wishes.

“We can’t just let him walk around unchecked,” Tarak said.

Taza shook his head. “The elders were right. There’s no reason to do anything to Chalipun. The problem has resolved itself.”

Tarak snorted slightly and shook his head. “You mean Tillie?” he asked. He didn’t like thinking about Tillie as a problem. His heart

ached as he thought about Tillie.

“How are you doing?” Taza asked. It was the first time that he had asked Tarak that. They had been too tired to talk as they rode back to the camp. Tarak hadn’t been able to speak, even if Taza had tried. He couldn’t stop his mind from wandering back to the look on Tillie’s face when her father had escorted her into the house.

It was likely the last time he would ever see her, Tarak doubted that her father would allow her to be there tomorrow, and he hated that there was so much unsaid between them.

“I’m fine,” Tarak said. Despite his grief, he didn’t care to talk to his brother about his feelings.

“I know that the two of you had developed a

friendship," Taza said. "But…."

"But this is exactly what you thought would happen," Tarak said, filling in the blanks for his brother. Tarak had warned him, and though he knew that he should have listened to him, Tarak was sure that he couldn't have stopped the feelings he had developed for Tillie even if he had tried.

The expression on Taza's face grew more drawn. "That's not what I was planning to say," Taza told him.

Tarak said nothing. He continued staring into the fire, thinking about Tillie. He wondered what she was doing. He imagined that she was sleeping in a nice bed after having some sort of expensive meal.

He hoped that she was happy, but something

made him wonder about that. He recalled how her father had been slightly cold and distant when he saw her. Tarak didn't know a great deal about Tillie's people, but his father had always been warm towards him.

If he had thought Tarak dead, he would have thanked the ancestors when Tarak returned. Tillie's father had been more concerned with getting her in the house and away from the people who had saved her life.

"I don't think that we should return tomorrow," Tarak said. The words came out of his mouth faster than he could stop them. He didn't want to speak out against his brother, but he couldn't stop the feeling of dread that crept down his spine.

"Tillie's father will listen to us," he said. "She will be able to speak to him tonight, and I'm sure that she will tell him how we helped her…"

Tarak shook his head. “Tillie told me that her father doesn’t care much for her opinion. He was forcing her to marry a man she didn’t want.”

Tarak didn’t mean to give away Tillie’s secrets, but he wanted his brother to understand.

“The tribe needs to broker peace,” Taza said. His eyes flared in the light. “You know this. We can’t continue on the way that we have been. If we do, the Apache won’t exist in a few years.”

Tarak sighed. He knew that there was some truth to what Taza was saying, but he didn’t think it was as easy as Taza was making things out to be.

“The Apache aren’t going to exist if the entire tribe turns against you,” Tarak said.

“That’s not going to happen,” Taza told him. “There are people who want this just as much as I do. I wouldn’t do it otherwise.”

Tarak was sure that there were some Apache who wanted peace. He couldn’t imagine that there were people who weren’t exhausted by the constant fighting and mistrust. He knew that he was. After meeting Tillie, all he wanted was to be with her. Even if Tillie hadn’t been promised to another, Tarak didn’t think that the tribe would approve of him marrying her.

“There are also people like Chalipun. There are those who have lost a lot to the white men, and they aren’t going to be happy to see you capitulate to them.”

Taza sighed. The frown lines around his mouth seemed to get deeper. For a moment, Taza felt bad, but there wasn't much else that he could do. He needed his brother to understand the dangers he was partaking in by trying to broker a peace that most of the tribe would distrust.

"I know that you are only saying what you think is best," Taza told him. "And I've thought a great deal about what I would do if the tribe lost faith in my leadership."

Tarak snorted. Taza was making it sound so simple as if he would be able to give up the chiefdom should the tribe lose trust. But that wasn't how things worked. A chief was in charge of the tribe until the day he died. Tarak shivered at the thought. He knew that people would be angry, but he couldn't imagine anyone trying to kill his brother over a peace talk.

Taza was a well-respected warrior. He had proven himself time and time again to have the best interests of the tribe at heart.

“What’s your plan?” Tarak asked.

Taza looked at him oddly. It was almost as if his brother expected him to know what his plan was going to be instructive. Months ago, Tarak might have, but at some point, things had changed between the two of them, and now, Taza’s motivations were a mystery.

“You would take over the tribe,” Taza said. He said it with such ease that Tarak was sure that he misheard him.

“What?” Tarak asked, sure that he misheard him.

“You would be chief in my absence,” he said. “And I know that you would make sure that the Apache people are safe.”

Tarak had never heard a more ridiculous plan in his entire life.

Chapter 33

Tillie sat at the table, pushing her food around listlessly with a fork. So far, since being home, she had taken a much-needed bath. Her maids had combed out the knots from her hair, and there had been enough to keep them very busy.

Now, she sat across from her father in the seat that had been hers since she was a girl pushing around stewed potatoes.

“At least I know that the Apache were taking good care to feed you,” her father quipped.

Tillie sighed. He had made very little effort to talk to her since her return. His excuse had been giving her time to get cleaned up and

situated. Tillie wondered if he simply didn't know what to say to her. It had been weeks since she was supposed to be at her new husband's home. At this point, her father would have assumed her dead.

"The Apache took very good care of me," Tillie said. "I would have died several times over if it wasn't for them." Tillie wanted to mention Tarak specifically, but she could already feel her father's suspicions as she talked about the Apache. "I hope you will take that into account when Taza comes to see you tomorrow."

Her father's face screwed up in confusion. "Taza?"

Tillie sighed. It didn't surprise her that he hadn't bothered to get the names of the men who had saved her. She had told Tarak that her father wouldn't necessarily care about her opinion, and now, she was wondering if he

would even care that the Apache had returned her home safely.

“He’s the chief,” Tillie said.

Her father’s lips thinned. “It sounds like you got close to those men.”

Tillie’s spine stiffened, and she dropped her fork. “I didn’t have much of a choice in getting close to the tribe,” she said.

Her father had the good sense to look contrite. It was the first time that he had shown any sort of remorse or emotion towards her.

Her father reached out across the table and grabbed her hand in his. Her father’s fingers were calloused, and the warmth of them

brought tears to her eyes. She had been so angry with her father that she had forgotten how much she wanted his love.

“I’m so happy that you are home,” he said. “I thought…”

Tillie said nothing. She was too choked up with emotion. She hadn’t spent a great deal of time thinking about what had happened with the bandits, but now that she was home, she couldn’t stop thinking about it.

“Have you told James and Henry’s family?” she asked. “I’m sure that they were worried when neither of them returned home.” Her voice cracked as she thought about how that conversation might have gone.

Her father looked down at her. “I’ve informed James and Henry’s families that they were

missing. I couldn't give them anything definitive since we hadn't found any information."

Tillie nodded.

"It might be good for me to go and talk to them," she said. It was the last thing that she wanted to do, but she knew that she had to. Her friend's families deserved peace.

"I counted the coin," her father said.

Tillie turned her head sharply. She hadn't thought that her father would want to talk about the gold. She didn't think that it mattered. She'd spent a great deal of time on the road, and not once had she thought about the coins. It felt like a huge burden around her waist. People had died for it, and it sickened her to think that her father cared so much

about it.

“You were right,” her father said. “The Apache didn’t take a single coin.”

Tillie didn’t know what to say. Her father had asked her what had happened when she first returned home, and she had told him, in great depth, but it had been an unemotional recounting.

She thought that now would be when they had a more emotional reunion.

“It’s good,” her father told her. “It means that we’ve been able to protect your dowry.”

Tillie laughed sardonically and shook her head. “So, you intend to send me back to

California?" she asked. She wasn't surprised. She had begged, cried, and pleaded with her father to allow her to make a match on her own, but he hadn't listened to her. She didn't know why she would even be surprised.

"Of course," her father said. He spoke as though there wasn't a question about it. "Your fiancé is very worried about you."

Tillie wanted to argue. She wanted to scream again, but she took all of that anger and suppressed it.

She didn't think it mattered who she married. The man she loved was out of her reach. Her heart ached as she thought about Tarak. Not saying goodbye to him had nearly killed her, but she thought that it was for the best.

There was never going to be able to say

goodbye to Tarak in a way that wasn't going to crush her heart completely.

"I know that you didn't want to marry…" her father trailed off. Tillie said nothing. She was surprised that her father had the good sense to remember that she didn't want to marry the man he had promised her to. Not that it mattered much.

"It's fine," Tillie said.

Her father's eyes narrowed. It was clear that he did not believe a word that she was saying, but it didn't matter.

"Tillie," he squeezed the hand that he was still holding. "If you want to talk about anything that happened…" It was almost like he couldn't get the words out correctly. Tillie wasn't surprised. Her father wasn't much for

emotion.

Tillie wanted to talk. She wanted her father to understand her feelings, but she knew that he wouldn't. He had made up his mind months ago, and he was determined to see her married off. Even if he wasn't, Tillie didn't think that he would take too kindly to her saying that she had fallen in love with the Apache chief's brother.

"I'm fine," she said. She took her hand out of her father's. "I'm just tired. I would like to rest."

"Of course," her father said. He returned back to his dinner. "I'll have Diane bring up some desert. You didn't eat much tonight."

The thought of Diane's treats would normally make Tillie salivate. Diane was a wonderful

cook. But tonight, Tillie just wanted to be alone. She wanted to wallow in her upset and get some rest.

“There’s no need to trouble her,” Tillie said. “I’m not hungry.” Tillie’s stomach was tied in knots as she thought about the Apache. Her father was meeting with them tomorrow, and she wasn’t sure how such a meeting would go. Her father didn’t seem to care much for the Apache. Though he didn’t say anything explicitly to her, she could tell by some of the remarks he made.

“Are you sure?” her father asked. There was concern in his voice. “You didn’t eat much.”

His concern made Tillie glad. It reminded her of how he used to treat her as a small girl when he was her entire world, and she thought that she was his.

Tillie sighed at the memories. “I had a big lunch on the road,” she said. Before she could stop herself, she leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of her father’s head. It was what she had always done. It was her way of saying goodnight.

“Have a good rest,” her father said. He pressed a kiss on her hand, which was his way of saying goodnight to her.

Tillie walked up the stairs and towards her bedroom. The house was set up so that her room was far away from her father’s quarters. When she was a girl, being so far away from her father had scared her, but now, she was glad that she was able to have total and complete privacy.

When she had first come home, there had been a flurry of activity. The maids had tried to hide tears as they stripped her of her ruined

dress and prepared her bath, and Tillie had spent so much time trying to console them that she wasn't able to look around her space. It was so odd to her to see her room, standing as it always had.

She sighed as she brushed her fingers against her bottles of perfume, the ones that she had shipped from New York, and the gold-plated mirror her father had gifted her that year on her birthday.

Now, all of her possessions felt incredibly frivolous. Being on the road with the Apache had taught Tillie that she was able to get by with a great deal fewer possessions. Tillie started to get undressed. Though she could live without her expensive possessions, she was excited to have fresh clothing and access to a hot bath.

Sitting down at her vanity, Tillie looked in the mirror. It was the first time she had really

gotten a good look at herself in weeks, and though she mostly looked the same, she could see small differences that showed all that she had gone through on her face.

Her cheeks were more slightly hollowed out than they had been when she left. There was also some slight discoloration from when she had fallen off the horse trying to save Elan. She was surprised her father hadn't noticed it.

Sighing, Tillie got up from the vanity and began milling around the room. She felt a sort of restless energy, which she attributed to her grief. She hadn't slept in nearly a day, except for a few hours in the saddle when she had been able to shut her eyes for a short amount of restless sleep.

By all accounts, Tillie should have been completely exhausted, but she wasn't. She hated that she hadn't been able to give a proper goodbye to Tarak, but it was more than

that. Tillie felt as though there were things left unfinished between her and the whole tribe. Though Taza was coming back tomorrow to speak with her father, Tillie knew that that was not a conversation that she was going to be allowed to partake in with the men.

It wouldn't surprise her if her father sent her away for the day or sent her right back on the road.

She had asked for time at home to recuperate, but she didn't know how much time she was going to get.

Releasing a long, low sigh, which seemed to be all Tillie could do. She pulled back the comforter and slid into bed. The soft mattress felt like a dream after weeks of sleeping on the hard ground.

Though Tillie still felt some sort of nervous energy rushing through her body, she was also exhausted. The warmth of her blankets and the sheer exhaustion that she felt was starting to take its toll on her body, and before she knew it, she felt her eyes close, and she drifted off to sleep.

Tillie wasn't sure how long she had been asleep when she felt herself being thrust awake by the feeling of something cool against her throat. Her eyes shot open.

"Shhh," a voice whispered from above her.

Tillie froze. She couldn't see the person standing above her, but no man was supposed to be in her bedroom.

Tillie opened her mouth to scream, but she felt the press of something against her throat.

“I wouldn’t do that,” the voice said. “If you do, I’ll have to cut you.”

Tillie froze. She recognized that voice. She knew who this man was, and she felt her blood starting to run cold.

“I don’t have what you want,” she said.

The man chuckled softly. “You’re the thing that I want,” he said. “You’re the most valuable thing on this ranch, and now, I have you.”

Tillie was more scared than she had ever been in her entire life.

Chapter 34

Tarak was groggy as he woke up. His eyes were thick with sleep, but Tarak didn't remember falling asleep. After dinner, he had gone around to see how things had been going in their absence. Though Tarak normally rode with Taza, he always got nervous about leaving the tribe undefended.

"Tarak!" a loud voice called out. He felt someone shaking him, but he was having trouble focusing both his eyes and his mind on the person in front of him. Tarak couldn't remember ever feeling like this, even when he had been completely exhausted.

When Tarak tried to speak, he felt as though his tongue weighed too much for his mouth.

“Tarak!” the voice yelled again. He felt hands holding him up, and he started blinking to try and wake himself up.

“Get me some water,” the voice said. That was right before Tarak felt cold water being thrown on his face. He spluttered as he became more aware. He felt another gush of water being thrown at his face.

This time, Tarak felt as though he had come out of a dream, and he was finally able to understand what was going on around him. At least, to some extent.

“What’s going on?” Tarak asked. Bipin was the man holding him up, and Elan was the one throwing water in his face. Tarak’s Apache senses were on highalert, and he immediately knew that something was wrong.

“He’s awake!” Elan yelled. As he did, Tarak heard an almost collective sigh of relief go through the tribe. Tarak looked around. His eyes felt heavy as he looked around. The first thing he noticed was that the people standing around him were the young and the old.

“What’s going on?” Tarak asked once more.

He tried to get to his feet, but he was beginning to realize that his limbs were much too heavy. As he tried to get up, he felt himself losing control of his body and fall right back down on the ground.

“Stay seated,” Bipin said. He brought a waterskin to Tarak’s lips. Tarak didn’t feel thirsty, but he drank deeply anyway. He didn’t know what was happening to him, but he trusted that Bipin did, and he was going to listen to the man.

Plus, the water seemed to be helping him to regain some sense of self.

“Can you stand?” Bipin asked. “It might help get the drug out of your system if you can walk all of this off.”

“Drug?” Tarak asked. He was starting to sound more and more like himself, and now, he was starting to wonder what had happened to him.

Bipin looked concerned. “I think you are going to be okay,” he said. “Which is good because we need you.”

There was an urgency in Bipin’s voice that told him that there was something wrong. Tarak began looking around. The last thing he remembered from the night before was eating

dinner with Taza and talking about how he wanted to approach the discussion with Tillie's father.

He didn't remember going to sleep.

"Where's Taza?" he asked. He reached out and took the waterskin from one of the boys. He poured the entire thing over his face in an attempt to clear the fog from his mind.

"We don't know," Bipin said.

The words cut through Tarak like an axe, and he felt his stomach roil as the dinner he had eaten started to come back up.

"What do you mean you don't know?" he asked. Tarak looked around. Taza was a

warrior. He had won many different battles. If something had happened to him, he wouldn't have gone easily.

On top of that, with Taza being chief, he was surrounded by the best warriors. Getting him wouldn't be easy. Tarak's disjointed mind took comfort in that.

"It seems that someone did something to the drink," Bipin said. "This morning, one of the women went into labor. When she tried to wake her husband, she couldn't. For a moment, we thought that maybe he went to join the ancestors."

Tarak looked around. There were men passed out near the fire where they had been eating. When they weren't traveling, the men tended to sleep with their wives and children. They didn't sleep by the fires unless the night was particularly cold.

“When we saw that the same thing had happened to all of you, we realized that someone had given you all some sort of drug to cause sleep.”

“And Taza is gone?”

The knowledge that his brother was missing helped Tarak to focus on overcoming the grogginess in his mind, which was no easy feat. Whoever had given him the sleeping potion had given him enough to make sure that he was going to struggle for the next few hours. Tarak assumed that if Bipin hadn’t woken him, then he would have slept through the night and into the morning.

As it was, streaks of sunlight were starting to lighten the sky, so Tarak was sure that he had been sleeping for much longer than was probably suggested considering that his

brother was missing.

“We need to gather some men,” Tarak said.

“We need to wake them up first,” Bipin said. “Most of the boys were unaffected, so they are going around trying to stir those that they can.”

Tarak nodded. He wanted nothing more than to get on his horse and go after his brother, which he knew wasn’t a sound plan. Even if he had the men to ride out, they had no idea who had taken Tarak or where he was.

“Have you found any tracks?” he asked Bipin.

Bipin shook his head positively. “There are tracks leading away from the camp,” he said.

Tarak felt a tightness in his chest. “How far do they lead?” he asked.

Bipin sighed. “We don’t know. We weren’t able to follow them. Almost all the men have been sleeping, and I didn’t want to leave the children and women….”

He didn’t need to say more. He understood what was being said. The number of Apache in the region was small. Until they knew the threat they faced, they were going to have to be careful, especially while most of their warriors were sleeping.

“We need to get everyone awake,” Tarak said. “We need to figure out who has done this.”

Bipin's face instantly became drawn and sorrowful. Tarak knew that there was something that he wasn't saying, and he felt that nausea in his stomach grow. "What is it?" he asked.

Bipin took a visible breath. His throat bobbed up and down, and it was clear that he did not wish to be the bearer of whatever news he was going to have to share. "I suspect that I know who did this," Bipin said. "When we were trying to get you awake, I went to check in on the children and elders. Most families were untouched, except for those who had been on the road with us."

Tarak didn't like the look in Bipin's eyes or the measured way he spoke. He suspected what it meant, and though he wasn't surprised, it didn't make hearing it any easier. He knew that as soon as Bipin spoke those words, everything was going to change. The reckoning of the Apache he had feared might have already come to pass.

“Chalipun is missing,” Bipin said.

Tarak felt his chest constrict. It took all of his strength to stay on his feet and not just because of the sleeping potion that was still working its way through his system.

“Anyone else?” Tarak asked. His voice was gruff with emotion. He was feeling so many all at once. He was angry. He was relieved. But most of all, he was hurt. Chalipun was family. They had grown up being almost as close as brothers. He couldn’t believe he would betray them like this. It was worse than anything Tillie’s people would have or could have done to them.

“No,” Bipin.

Tarak nodded. He was relieved to hear that. He would have been worried if his brother had been taken by a group. The fact that Chalipun seemed to be acting alone, though Tarak wasn't sure of that completely, spoke well to the power that his brother commanded as chief.

"But there's more," Bipin said.

"More?"

He nodded before releasing a low whistle. "Bring the boy," he commanded.

Tarak was impressed by the way that Bipin had taken charge. It would not be something that he would soon forget, and he made a note to speak about the older man's leadership to his brother.

“Tell Tarak what you told me,” Bipin said.

The boy who was standing before them was tall and thin. His hair came to his chin, just brushing his shoulders. He looked terrified to be standing in front of Tarak. Tarak couldn’t blame him. He could only imagine why the young boy, who barely looked older than fifteen, could be standing in front of him.

“Chalipun snuck away from the group while we were on the road.”

Tarak’s brow rose. “What?” he asked. “I didn’t notice such a thing.”

“Chief Taza did. He noticed, and he wanted me to find out why. I’m a good tracker, and he didn’t think that Chalipun would notice me

tracking him at night."

Tarak wasn't sure what made him more angry at that moment. His brother had hidden important information from him. His cousin had snuck off. Or the fact that he missed all of this.

He knew why he had missed it. He had been focused on Tillie. During the last part of their trip, the two of them had stayed up, spending most of their nights together, under the stars.

"What did you find out?" Tarak asked. He didn't have time to think about Tillie at that moment. He needed to figure out why Chalipun went to such lengths to get Taza, who helped him, and what he was planning.

The boy squared his shoulders as he looked at Tarak. "He was sneaking out to talk to some

white man," the boy said. "I don't know what they were saying, but I know he got those berries that he fed to Tillie's horse from him."

Tarak was taken aback. He wasn't sure what he thought Chalipun had been up to. He assumed he had been meeting with other tribesmen to plan this obvious coup. Now, he wondered if there was more to it than that.

"Did you tell my brother this?" Tarak asked. It angered him that he had to do so. Taza should have told him that he had his own suspicions about Chalipun. Now, Tarak was trying to piece together Chalipun's plan with only half the information.

The boy nodded. "I did," he said. "Chief Taza suspected that Chalipun was after Tillie."

Tarak nodded. That he knew.

“When I described the man to him, he got nervous. Made me promise to not follow Chalipun anymore.”

Tarak furrowed his brow in confusion. As far as he knew, his brother didn’t keep company with Tillie’s people. But it also seemed that Tarak didn’t know Taza as well as he thought. His brother had been keeping things from him their entire journey.

“Thank you,” Tarak told the boy.

He beamed brightly, clearly glad to be praised for a job well down. “Be sure to help the others get the men awake.”

The boy nodded. His eyes were bright and

eager as the morning sun as he went to go help splash awake the Apache warriors.

“What are you thinking?” Bipin asked.

Tarak sighed. “I’m thinking that my brother suspected something.”

“And he didn’t tell you?”

Though Tarak knew Bipin didn’t mean for them to, his words cut through him like a knife.

“No,” he said. “He said nothing. Apparently, our chief has been keeping secrets.” Tarak couldn’t help the anger that swelled in his chest towards his brother. “I hope they don’t end up getting him killed.”

Chapter 35

Tillie was terrified. It was the type of terrified that fogged up one's mind and made it difficult to think clearly. When she had woken up, with a knife to her throat, she had been terrified. Now though, she was even more frightened.

The man had tied her up and thrown her on the back of a horse. Despite her instincts to scream, she had remained quiet the entire time, too afraid that he would make good on his promise to kill her if she wasn't.

Tillie knew that he was serious too. She could still feel the impression of the knife he held to her throat, and she was sure that if she had been able to lift her fingers to her throat, they would come away stained with blood.

The jostling of the horse was also making Tillie nauseous, which was affecting her ability to think clearly. Too many thoughts were swimming in her head. Too much fear was there as well.

She knew that she needed to think, but she was struggling to do so. Taking as much of a deep breath as she could, Tillie tried to focus her mind on the task at hand, which was figuring out how she was going to get free when the horses finally came to a stop.

Tillie believed the man was called Johnny, but she couldn't be sure. She had only gotten a glimpse of his face, which had been highlighted by the moonlight streaming into her window, when he had tied her hands and placed a blindfold over her eyes. It disoriented her to not be able to see her surroundings, which she assumed was the point.

Tillie tried to pull her hands apart to test the bindings, but they were holding steady, and doing so nearly made her fall off the horse.

She felt tears filling her eyes under her blindfold. She couldn't believe that she had been so stupid. She'd never told Tarak about the man who had gotten away. She had been focusing on surviving and getting back home. Then, she had been focusing on how to not be miserable after being pulled away from the man she loved.

Tillie had planned to tell her father about Johnny's betrayal right away. She wanted him to know that it had been one of his men who had tried to rob her and had killed her dearest friends. But things had gone by the wayside when Tillie arrived home. Talking to her father had been difficult, and Tillie had been exhausted by her travels and her grief.

Now, she wanted to kick herself for being so foolish. Tillie had assumed that Johnny was long gone, too worried about her father's wrath to stick around. He hadn't been. He'd been lying in wait for her return. She just didn't understand why.

Tillie felt the horse slowing down, and she was sure that she would soon find out why this man was determined to hurt her. The thought caused the knot of fear in her stomach to tighten. She'd spent most of the journey too scared to think, and now, they were stopping, and she had no course of action.

Without her sight, Tillie had to rely on her sense of touch to tell her what was happening. She felt as the horse came to a stop. She even felt as Johnny dismounted. She heard his boots hit the ground, and she waited with anxious anticipation for whatever was going to happen next.

She didn’t have to wait very long. Within seconds, she felt a hand grabbing her waist and hauling her off the horse and onto the ground. Tillie groaned as she hit the dirt. She could taste it in her mouth as a cloud of it bloomed around her. The bruises from her previous fall were just fading, but she could feel each one of them activating again.

“Get up,” Johnny said. His tone was even, but there was an undercurrent of anger that Tillie could detect. This man didn’t like her. She didn’t know why. She had very little recollection of him, and she was sure that they had very few interactions together.

Still, Tillie didn’t want to test his patience, so she struggled to get to her feet as fast as she could.

Johnny reached out and grabbed the rope between her hands, using it to pull her towards him. Tillie released a squeak as she

lost her footing and fell into his chest.

He chuckled. The sound of it was sinister, and Tillie felt the tiny hairs on her arms standing at attention. She knew immediately that Johnny was enjoying his torment of her. She had already promised herself that she would destroy him for what he had done to her friends, but now, her desire for vengeance was almost so great that she could taste it on her tongue.

“Aren’t such a pretty, delicate flower now, are ya?” he whispered in her ear.

Tillie tried not to gag at the sourness of his breath. She could smell the old whiskey on his tongue.

For a moment, Tillie worried that Johnny was going to do something untoward to her, more

so than kidnapping, like plant a kiss on her lips. But finally, he spun her around and begun leading her away from the horses.

“Where are we going?” she asked when she was finally able to get her voice back.

“There’s someone eager to see you.”

Tillie didn’t like the sound of that. She couldn’t imagine that anyone who would have Johnny kidnap her from her bed was a friend. She couldn’t relay her fear, though. She knew that she needed to try and keep her head on straight if she wanted to survive.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“You saw me that day when my boys and I

ambushed your stagecoach," he said.

Tillie still didn't understand what that had to do with him kidnapping her out of her bed. Raiding her stagecoach was a planned crime, but in many ways, it was still a crime of opportunity. Her father never should have sent her off with so much gold. She suspected that a man like Johnny could use that money.

Pulling her out of her bed in her home was much riskier. She didn't understand why he would take such a chance.

"My father won't pay for my return if you are thinking of ransoming me. He'd sooner let me die than part with his gold."

For a moment, Johnny hesitated, and for a moment, Tillie wondered if he would just let her go.

“Keep walking,” he told her instead, pushing her forward slightly. Tillie tripped over the hem of her nightdress. She was grateful that she was wearing something so modest, but she still felt overly exposed as she felt the cool air hitting her skin.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked. “If it’s the gold you want, I can assure you that I don’t have it.”

“I’m going to get my gold,” Johnny said.

Tillie tried not to snort. Her father would send a band of his best men after her, and she was sure that Johnny would fall.

“Besides, I’m not the only one who wants

you," Johnny said.

His words confused Tillie, at least until he grabbed the back of the blindfold and pulled it off of her face. As Tillie adjusted to the light, she was able to see a large form standing in front of her.

"Chalipun?" she asked. She gasped in surprise as she took in the large man looming in front of her. Chalipun was looking at her with his usual hatred in his eyes, but that wasn't what caused Tillie's shock.

Taza was sprawled out and tied up behind Chalipun.

"You didn't think we'd seen the last of one another, did you?" Chalipun asked. There was a smugness to his voice that made her want to punch him right in the face.

“I thought that your tribe would have taken care of you for your betrayal, but I guess that I was wrong,” she said. She looked over at Taza. She wondered what had happened to him. Taza wasn’t a small man. She had seen him fight Johnny’s men, and he had been just as fierce as Tarak.

Now he looked as though he could barely keep his head upright.

“What did you do to him?” Tillie asked. She tried to rush forward to make sure that Taza was okay, but Johnny grabbed her and swung her back before she could get too far.

“He’ll be fine in a few hours,” Chalipun said. But there was something about his tone that made Tillie worried that neither of them was going to be fine.

“I thought that you hated my people?” Tillie asked.

“I do,” Chalipun told her. “Your people are evil. You bring nothing but death.”

Tillie felt Johnny tense at her. She was sure that even if he was working with Chalipun, he didn’t like him. Now, that Tillie’s blindfold was off, she took the opportunity to look around. She didn’t see anyone but the two men, which made her slightly less afraid. She was certain that if she could get Taza awake, they could get away from these two men.

“How do you two even know one another?” she asked. She was having trouble wrapping her mind around how they ended up here.

“None of that should matter to you,” Chalipun said. “All that matters is that we both want you gone.”

The hatred that Chalipun looked upon her with made that feeling of fear she had had in her stomach return. Tillie understood Johnny’s motivation for kidnapping her. He thought that he could get money from her father.

He had been willing to kill her on the road for it, so kidnapping wasn’t even as serious as murder. But she couldn’t understand how or why Chalipun was working with Johnny or why Taza was there.

“Tie her up,” Chalipun ordered.

For a moment, Johnny hesitated. Tillie wondered if it was because he didn’t like

taking orders from an Apache. After all, Chalipun's people helped to kill Johnny's friend. But that hesitation didn't last very long, and before Tillie could say anything, Johnny was pushing her forward.

She tried to drag her feet. She didn't want to get tied up again. She worried that if she allowed that to happen, then she was going to end up dead.

"Don't fight," Johnny said. "He wants you dead, but I just want my money."

Tillie looked at him in alarm. She couldn't believe it, but she was starting to wonder if Johnny was the lesser of two evils. "He's not going to let you ransom me," she said. Her whisper was frantic. Chalipun was just far away not to hear her. He would assume that they were just struggling. "You'll never get your money if I'm dead."

Johnny said nothing. His one moment of hesitation was gone, and the sneer had returned as he tied her to a tree stump.

Tillie didn't give in easily. She kicked and screamed as she resisted, but it was to no avail. Johnny tied her up next to a Taza who was practically lying prone on the ground.

"What now?" Tillie asked. Her immense fear was back. Johnny and Chalipun had tied her and Taza to the edge of a cliff. It wouldn't take much from either man to push her and Taza over the cliffside and end their lives. Something told her that that might not be the case.

"Now, you wait," Chalipun said before turning to walk away. She was shocked that he and Johnny were simply going to leave her there. She knew that she shouldn't be. Chalipun,

especially, thought that he had won.

Tillie didn't know what they would be waiting for, but she knew that she couldn't afford to sit there and do nothing.

Tillie wasn't sure how long it had been since Chalipun and Johnny had left her and Tarak. By her guess, it was now, mid-day. The sun was bright and high in the sky. She could feel it beating down on her skin.

Luckily, after weeks exposed, her face had learned to not burn so easily.

"Taza?" Tillie asked for what felt like the hundredth time. She shoved him slightly with

the heel of her slipper. She was grateful that Johnny had allowed her time to put them on before dragging her out of bed. “Are you awake?”

Taza had been going in and out of consciousness for hours. Whatever Chalipun had done to him was making him useless, and Tillie prayed that it worked itself out of his system sooner rather than later.

“Tillie?” he groaned. His dark eyes looked more alert than they had the previous time she had been able to get him awake. “What are you doing here?”

Tillie bit her lip to keep a laugh from bubbling out of her mouth. She was starting to feel panicked madness, especially as she realized that Taza had been given some sort of sleeping potion. He was her only chance of overcoming both Chalipun and Johnny, and it seemed like he was going to be very little help.

She sighed. Taza had asked her the same question every time he was awake.

“Tillie?” he asked. His voice sounded stronger than it had, and so, Tillie turned to look at him.

“Is it really you?” she asked. She couldn’t allow herself to have hope in case it was dashed again, but as she looked at Taza, whose eyes were droopy with sleep but more alert than they had been, she was starting to realize that whatever Chalipun gave Tarak was starting to wear off.

“Who else would it be?” Taza asked. He groaned as he moved. “What happened?” he asked. “Why am I tied up?”

Tillie furrowed her brow. Taza had been here before she had, and Chalipun hadn't exactly told her why Taza was here.

"That's a question for Chalipun," she said. "He's working with one of my father's men, for what end, I don't know." That wasn't completely true. Tillie suspected that Johnny wanted gold, and Chalipun wanted her dead. What she didn't understand was what Taza had to do with any of that or how they knew one another.

"Chalipun," Taza growled. The sound surprised her. Taza always seemed easygoing. She couldn't remember a time when she had seen him lose his temper.

"You don't seem very surprised," Tillie noted.

“Chalipun has been up to this since we got on the road,” he said. Tillie watched him strain as he tried his best to try and free his hands.

“Why would Chalipun work with one of my father’s men?” Tillie asked. “And why would he kidnap you? I know why he hates me.”

Taza released a heavy sigh. “Chalipun has been meeting with this man for weeks. The man….”

“Johnny,” Tillie supplied. “His name is Johnny. He’s one of my father’s cattle hands, and it was him who tipped off the bandits that I was traveling with a great amount of gold.”

“Well, Chalipun and Johnny had been meeting. I guess that they both wanted to get you out of the way before we got you to your father.”

“Why take you?” Tillie asked.

Taza sighed. “I suspect that Chalipun wants to take over the tribe as chief. He does not agree with my attempts to make peace with your people.”

Tillie could understand a coup, but Chalipun and Taza were cousins. “Would he really kill you?” she asked.

Chalipun became quiet, and Tillie immediately knew her answer. It didn’t give her much hope. If Chalipun would kill his own cousin, the chief of his tribe, she had absolutely no chance of surviving.

And from the way that Taza was straining

against his bindings, she was starting to realize that she couldn't necessarily rely on him to save her.

"What do we do now?" she asked. She didn't actually expect an answer.

"We pray to the ancestors that Tarak manages to find the two of us," Taza said. "Because I don't think that Chalipun is able to listen to reason."

That was exactly what Tillie was afraid of.

Chapter 36

It had taken Tarak longer than he hoped to get a search party together. When he had woken from the potion that Chalipun has slipped all of them, he had been alert, but he had had little control of his body.

It had taken him and his men hours to be aware enough to ride. Now, they were tracking the breadcrumbs that Chalipun had left, and there weren't many.

"We need to work faster," Tarak said. He felt a sort of desperation as he thought about his brother. Tarak would never forgive himself if Chalipun was able to harm his brother.

"The tracks lead into town," one of the men

said. “We don’t know why Chalipun would go into town.”

Tarak’s head snapped up. “The tracks lead into town?” he asked. He had ridden back to the central point after his groups’ tracking had turned up next to nothing. The tracks had stopped about a mile from where the tribe was staying.

Tarak’s man nodded. “They became harder to follow the closer we got into town, but we think they may have veered off to the right before they made it.”

Tarak felt his mind working quickly. He was starting to suspect that Chalipun has help outside of the tribe. He hadn’t thought that the man he’d been meeting with was involved. There had once been one horse missing and one set of tracks leading away from the tribe.

Tarak assumed that Chalipun had acted on his own. That his anger at Taza bringing him forward to the elders had caused him to lash out and do something stupid.

But as time passed, Tarak was beginning to think that this was planned. Chalipun wouldn't have been able to drug all of them by himself, and Tarak was sure that he wouldn't have been able to drag Tarak away either.

"Bring me the healer," Tarak barked. They were only about a mile from the tribe, so it wouldn't take too much time for the healer to be brought to him.

"Are you sure about this?" Bipin asked. He had insisted on coming along, and Tarak wasn't going to argue with him. The older man had more than proven himself.

Tarak nodded. “Chalipun had help,” he said.

He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. He was grateful that Tillie was with her father. He had worried that she was somehow mixed up in all of this, and he was sure that he couldn’t focus on her while also trying to find his brother.

“What do you think Chalipun is up to?” Bipin said. It was the question that everyone had been asking themselves. None of them could understand what Chalipun had been thinking by taking Taza. Tarak was certain that after his actions, not a single member of the tribe would follow him willingly.

“I think he wants to stop Taza from making peace with the white men,” he said. “He’s made it clear that he thinks that they are the enemy.”

“Most do,” Bipin said. “He would have had better luck spreading discord within the tribe if he hadn’t taken Taza and poisoned all of the men. Some still haven’t woken.”

Tarak nodded. Bipin was right. Tarak couldn’t fathom what was going through Chalipun’s mind when he decided to do this.

“Do you think that he told the healer anything about his plan?” Bipin asked.

Tarak nodded. “I think that he was angry with Taza for taking Tillie’s side when it came to healing you,” Tarak said. He remembered the sheer hatred that the healer had leveled at Tillie when she dared to intervene.

He might not be able to enact his revenge on

her, but Tarak wouldn't put it past him to help Chalipun harm Taza in some way.

"Here they come," Bipin said.

"That was quicker than I thought," Tarak said.

He jumped off of his horse. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he was more than willing to get violent if necessary. Tarak flexed his hands as he thought about his brother and cousin.

"Tarak," the healer said as they rode up to him. "I heard that you were in need of me." He jumped down from his horse. Tarak could see that he was nervous. Though he was trying to hide it, there was sweat breaking out on his brow, and Tarak could see a slight tremor in his hands.

“I want to know what you gave Chalipun to put us all in such a deep sleep,” Tarak said. He figured that it was best to just get to the point. They didn’t have time to flirt around the subject.

“I don’t know what you mean,” the healer stammered. “Whatever Chalipun did, he did it on his own.”

Tarak walked forward. “I don’t think he did,” he said. “I know my cousin, and he wouldn’t know what herbs to mix together to put us all asleep.”

The healer swallowed heavily. Tarak could see his throat working as he stammered once more. “I-I….”

“I want to know what Chalipun is planning,” Tarak said. He took another step closer. He was nearly nose-to-nose with the healer. “And you better tell me now unless you would like my men to get the information out of you. They aren’t very happy about the way they are currently feeling.”

The fear on the healer’s face grew ten-fold, and Tarak knew that he was going to tell him everything soon enough.

“Chalipun just told me that he wanted something that would put you all to sleep. He didn’t tell me that he was going to do something to Taza,” he said.

Tarak didn’t believe him. It didn’t make sense. Chalipun would have no other reason to give all of them a sleeping potion. And from the paling of the healer’s face, Tarak knew that he was right.

“You aren’t being honest with me,” Tarak said. He reached for the axe on his belt. Tarak wasn’t a violent man, but he was willing to do whatever he could to protect his brother and their tribe.

The healer looked as though he wanted to run away as fast as he could.

“You better start talking,” Bipin said, jumping into the fray. “He’s not wrong. The men are angry, and they are looking for someone to blame.”

“All right,” the healer said. He raised his hands in surrender. “All right.”

Tarak was glad that he was finally going to get some answers, which made him elated.

“Chalipun didn’t tell me that he was going to do something to Taza,” he said. “I swear it.”

“So, what did he tell you?” Tarak asked. He was trying to keep himself calm.

The healer gulped once more, and for a moment, Tarak really did worry that he was going to have to use his axe to get answers. “He told me that he needed to put you and Taza to sleep because he wanted to go after Tillie,” he said.

“What?” Tarak roared.

“He said that she was evil and that it was his duty to get rid of her. He told me that if he didn’t, he was worried that we would all be

punished by the ancestors."

The pieces were starting to come together for Tarak. He walked towards his horse and jumped into the saddle. He barely looked at the healer. There was nothing for them to say. Tarak would save his brother and Tillie, and then he would make sure that anyone involved would pay.

"I swear I didn't know what Chalipun was going to do!" Tarak heard behind him.

He ignored it. He needed to find Tillie and Taza before Chalipun did something that they couldn't come back from.

Chapter 37

“Where do you think they went?” Taza asked. He had given up trying to get out of his restraints an hour ago. The hot sun had zapped him of the little energy that he’d had, once he came awake from whatever Chalipun had given him.

“I don’t know,” Tillie said honestly. “Maybe to my father. I know that Johnny wants to try and get gold for my return.”

Taza shook his head. “Chalipun isn’t going to let you go alive,” he said.

Tillie blinked. She hadn’t expected Taza to be so blunt in the way that he spoke, but Tillie appreciated it. She didn’t want him to treat

her with any sort of delicacy but hearing him speak so nonchalantly about how Chalipun wanted her dead made her feel ill.

“I don’t understand why you are here, though,” Tillie said. She still didn’t get it. She didn’t know much about the Apache, but she had seen the way that his tribal warriors had deferred to him. The tribe might not have always agreed with Taza, but they respected him.

“I told you….”

Tillie shook her head. “Yes, he’s planning a coup,” she said. “But I don’t understand what he thinks will happen. Tarak said that he would be next in line to be chief if something happened to you.”

Speaking Tarak’s named caused an ache in

Tillie's heart. If Chalipun had his way, she and Tarak would never see one another again. Though Tillie hadn't expected to see Tarak again, after being returned home, the idea of Tarak feeling the pain of not just her loss but also his brother made her angrier than being kidnapped.

"He thinks that Tarak's position isn't as strong as it has been considering…" he trailed off, but Tillie could feel his eyes on her.

"Considering our relationship," she finished.

Tillie sighed and leaned her head back on the post that they had been tied to. "Do you think Chalipun is going to do something to Tarak?" It was bothering Tillie that Chalipun and Johnny had simply disappeared. It made her incredibly uneasy.

Taza released a small snort. “I don’t think Chalipun would be stupid enough to go after both myself and Tarak. It’s one thing to kill me. I’m the chief, and though the Apache will see Chalipun’s actions as a betrayal, we are also a tribe who appreciates strength.”

“But that’s different for Tarak?” he asked.

Taza nodded. “Tarak doesn’t make decisions for the tribe,” he said. “I do. Killing him would be seen as senseless. Besides, I’m not sure that Chalipun wants to kill me or Tarak.”

The sun was starting to go down in the sky, and Tillie was grateful for the relief from the heat.

“Why is that?” Tillie asked. She worried that if they were out here, through the night then Chalipun might not have to do more than

leave them exposed to the animals and the elements.

“He would have had the chance to kill me when he gave me that potion. It would have been much easier for him to get rid of me then.”

Tillie said nothing. She didn’t necessarily agree with him. Chalipun liked the show of it all, and she thought that he must have had something else planned that would make both Tillie and Taza’s deaths more dramatic.

“Well,” Tillie said. “If he doesn’t come back for us soon, then he won’t have to worry about what to do with us.”

There was a snap of a twig, and Tillie felt herself jump slightly.

“He won’t be able to leave us here overnight,” Taza said. There was such confidence in his voice that Tillie felt a part of her instantly calm.

“Why is that?” she asked. “I don’t think Chalipun is making very sound choices these days.”

Taza snorted. “You aren’t wrong on that,” he said. “But Tarak would know that I am missing by now, and he would have made sure to begin a search. My brother is smart. I wouldn’t be surprised if he knows you are missing as well, and I know that that would be even more motivating.”

Tillie hated how his words swelled her heart. She liked the idea of Tarak caring enough to try and find her. But she also worried that Taza was too confident. She worried that

Chalipun might have done something to Tarak. She knew that they were family, but she suspected that Chalipun didn't care any longer.

She shivered as she thought about the anger Chalipun had looked upon her and Tarak with. It had been pure, and she was sure that he would have killed both of them if he thought he could have gotten away with it.

The sound of twigs breaking got louder, and Tillie immediately knew that someone was coming upon them. She prayed that it would be someone who was going to rescue them.

"Tillie," Taza whispered. She turned to look at him as much as she could. She was sure that she was wide-eyed and full of fear. She tried to blink it away. If Chalipun and Johnny were coming upon her, she didn't want to give them the satisfaction. "When Chalipun unties your hands, I want you to run."

“What?” she released a strangled whisper.

“He won’t expect it. You might be able to get away.”

“I can’t leave you,” Tillie said. She could see the truth in Chalipun’s words. He would be focusing on the bigger threat, which meant that she might be able to get away from him.

“Listen to me,” Taza said. “You do your best to try and get away when you see the chance. It’ll be much easier for me to take Chalipun if I’m not worried about him using you against me.”

His words brought tears to Tillie’s eyes. “I thought you didn’t like me much,” she said.

Taza gave her a serious look. “My brother loves you, which means you are family. I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

His words warmed Tillie, and she wasn’t quite sure what to say to him. She didn’t have a chance to say anything. Before she could speak, Chalipun and several other Apache men came into the clearing.

Tillie’s eyes widened. She recognized some of the men as ones who had traveled with them, and others looked too old to be on a horse.

“I told you that I had him,” Chalipun bragged.

There was a grumble across the group. “We didn’t doubt you,” one of the other men said.

“We just question why you need to do what you did.”

Tillie noticed that not a single one of the men looked their way. It made her angry for Taza. Chalipun made it clear that his desires were nefarious, but these men seemed to be content to go along with them, or at least, they weren’t running in the opposite direction.

“I told you,” Chalipun said.

He sounded like one of those roaming preachers she’d been warned about in church. The kind that was much too radical to hold a congregation.

“Taza has been corrupted by the white men,” he said. “Many of you saw it with your own eyes.”

There was a bit of agreement amongst the men.

“If anyone has been corrupted here, it is Chalipun,” Taza said. Tillie was surprised at how unaffected he sounded. It was almost as if he were sitting down for a cup of tea. Tillie was impressed. She wanted to scream and shout at the men and remind them that this was not the way of the Apache. But she kept her lips pressed tightly together and allowed Taza to handle it.

“The ancestors are working to punish us for your actions. That’s why there was that earthquake and why all the men succumbed to such a deep sleep. The ancestors are warning us….”

“You defile the names of our ancestors with your talk,” Taza said.

The men surrounding Chalipun looked increasingly more uncomfortable, and Tillie was starting to believe Taza when he said that Chalipun was going to struggle to take his men.

“You defiled the ancestors. You defiled our fathers when you decided to help her.” Chalipun turned, pointing towards Tillie.

“Our fathers were good men,” Taza said. “They would never have left a woman out on the road to fend for herself. They wanted peace, but it didn’t happen in their time.” There was a small hint of desperation in Taza’s voice, and Tillie was starting to wonder if part of his desire to broker peace between his tribe and her people had something to do with his father.

“You lie!” Chalipun said. He charged forward toward Tillie, and she felt herself cringe inward slightly. She hated that she feared him so, but Tillie knew that Chalipun was dangerous.

“Don’t touch her!” a voice called out, and for a moment, Tillie felt relief. “You agreed to keep her alive until her father brought the gold. We had a deal.”

Tillie looked over to see Johnny and several men, ones she didn’t recognize, walking towards them. She sneered at him. She couldn’t stop herself. She wasn’t like Taza. She wasn’t able to control her emotions in the same way as he could.

“Look at Chalipun,” Taza said. “He’s willing to work with the very people he says are the enemy. Maybe, I’m not the one who the ancestors are angry with.”

Chalipun didn't like that, especially because it seemed like the men were also starting to question why Chalipun might be working with the white men. "Did he promise you gold?" Taza asked. "Is that why you are doing this?"

"I'm doing this to save the Apache," Chalipun sneered. He reached out and grabbed Tillie. She released a small squeak as he pulled her.

"You said that you wouldn't hurt her until we got our gold," Johnny yelled. Tillie looked over at the Apache men. One was inching towards Taza while Chalipun's focus was on her. She wondered if he was going to free his chief or finish what Chalipun had started.

She honestly had no idea anymore.

“I don’t care about your gold,” Chalipun sneered. “It’s done nothing but corrupt you.”

He pulled Tillie, who was still tied to the tree. She released a squeak of pain as his actions painfully pulled her arms.

“She must die,” Chalipun said. He reached for the knife at his waist. Before Tillie could say anything, he cut the rope that was keeping her tied to the post. Tillie was so surprised by the swiftness of his actions that she nearly missed her opportunity.

Luckily for her, Chalipun mistook her shock for fear, and he couldn’t stop himself from gloating.

“You better hope that her father doesn’t want proof that she’s alive,” he said. He turned, clearly intending to slit her throat with his

knife, but Tillie was quicker. Before he could cut her, she brought her foot as hard as she could between his legs.

She felt it connect immediately, and though she wanted nothing more than to watch Chalipun crumble in pain, she remembered Taza's words and took off.

"Grab her!" Tillie heard from behind her. She had taken off the moment that Chalipun had doubled over.

Johnny had grabbed Tillie out of bed, which actually worked to her advantage. Without heavy skirts, a corset, and her petticoats, she was able to move much more swiftly. The problem was that Tillie had no idea where to go. They were on the edge of a cliffside that Tillie didn't recognize.

Breathing heavily, Tillie did her best to try and figure out her surroundings while also not stopping.

Unfortunately for her, she didn't manage to get very far before arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her hard.

"Gotcha!" a male voice called in her ear.

Tillie screamed out in frustration. "Let me go!" she hollered. She was going to die anyway, so unlike when Johnny pulled her out of bed, she knew that she had absolutely nothing to lose. If they were going to kill her anyway, she was going to go down fighting.

"Stay still," Johnny yelled. He squeezed her tightly around the midsection, causing her to lose her breath.

She leaned over and tried to bite one of his forearms. “Let me go!” she screamed as she thrashed.

“I’ll let you go when your father makes sure I have my gold,” he said.

Tillie continued thrashing and screaming as Johnny dragged her back towards the cliffside. She was angry at herself for not being able to inflict more pain upon him. Thinking about it, Tillie knew that she was never going to be able to get away on her own. She had no weapons, no horse, and no idea where to go, but she had hoped to make it more difficult for her captors.

“My father will never pay you!” she screamed.

“Shut up,” Johnny told her. He pressed more tightly against her midsection, and Tillie had to slow her struggles in order to get air into her lungs.

He dragged her back towards the cliff, but things weren’t as Tillie had left them. The Apache men had weapons drawn. One was standing by Taza’s side, knife out, and the others were with Chalipun, looking ready to come to blows.

“I think this is where we part ways,” Johnny said to Chalipun.” It looks like you have a lot to discuss with your people.”

Chalipun sneered. “You don’t go anywhere,” he ordered.

Johnny dragged her slightly further away from the cliff’s edge towards where the three men

he brought with him were standing. They had horses at the ready, and Tillie wanted to kick herself for not grabbing one.

“You have what you want, and so do we,” Johnny said. “I say we go our separate ways.”

Chalipun opened his mouth, likely to argue, but the sound of a horn in the distance and voices yelling caused him to freeze. It would have been comical if Tillie wasn’t having trouble breathing.

“What’s that?” Johnny asked. There was fear in his voice. Johnny had been tough when he had a knife to her throat, and she’d been defenseless in bed, but she was starting to realize that he was more of an opportunist than a warrior.

“Those are Apache warriors,” Taza said

calmly. “And they are coming for your head.”

Chapter 38

Tarak felt a sort of white-hot rage come over him as he saw Tillie in the arms of another man. It wasn't jealousy. He could tell by the way she hung over the man's arms, like a doll who had been squeezed too tightly, that she was being held against her will.

Tarak rode with a small group of men, and they weren't all Apache.

"Don't shoot," he yelled to the man next to him who had his gun out. "You might hit Tillie."

The man hesitated and lowered his gun. Tarak was glad. He'd been nervous about going to Tillie's father, but they had started to run out

of options. Tarak suspected where Chalipun might take Taza, but he hadn't been sure.

Luckily, the man who had taken Tillie, who Tarak suspected had been meeting with Chalipun, had been stupid enough to give Tillie's father a location. He'd also had a man follow the kidnapper, and he had been more than happy to work with Tarak's men to make sure that Tillie returned safely.

"Let her go!" Tarak yelled. He led his men right up to the cliff clearing.

The man's grip on Tillie tightened, and Tarak's hands immediately went to his belt. He could throw his ax, but he was scared that he might hit Tillie by mistake.

Tarak's mind was whirling with fear, but he knew that he needed to try and keep himself

as calm as possible. “You don’t want to do this,” Tarak said.

“Don’t listen to him!” Tarak closed his eyes slightly in frustration before he swung around to look at his cousin. When he rode up on this gang, he hadn’t taken time to find his brother. Tarak hadn’t needed to. He had already ensured Taza’s safety. “He’s her lover. He’ll kill you the moment you let her go. Have honor! Kill her first.”

Tarak wanted nothing more than to throw his axe at Chalipun, but he wasn’t about to take his eyes off of Tillie. The man holding her and the men surrounding them weren’t Apache. While Tarak no longer saw Tillie’s people as the enemy, he knew that these men would kill her if they felt as though they could get away with it.

“If you kill her,” Taza said. His voice carried across the clearing. “My brother will kill you,

but if you let her go, you won't have an issue with the Apache."

Taza was standing, no longer tied where Tarak assumed he had been. Tarak's eyes cut over to assess his brother. He looked fine and bored with the situation. Tarak knew that it was just his way of trying to minimize any death.

Tarak knew his brother well enough to see the signs of stress. His hands were balled into fists, and he hadn't taken his eyes off of Chalipun.

"It's not just Apache here," one of the men said, drawing Tarak's attention back to the group in front of him.

"All we want is Miss Hartley," one of Tillie's father's men said. "What you three do after you hand her over is up to you."

Tarak tensed as he waited to see what happened next.

“Kill her!” Chalipun screamed. Tarak gripped the edge of his belt to stop himself from throwing his axe at his cousin and ending his life. Chalipun had done a great deal wrong, but if Tarak knew his brother, he knew that he would want Chalipun to stand before the Apache and announce his crimes.

Two of the men looked at their leader, the one holding Tillie. Her face was pale, and he worried that she was hurt.

“We’ll take her with us,” the man said. He backed up towards his horse. “Just far enough to ensure our safety.”

Tarak didn't believe him. He might not think that Tillie's people were as bad as he once did, but he did agree with Chalipun that greed and gold were a terrible evil. This man had been willing to kill Tillie for that gold, and he was sure that he wasn't just going to let her go.

"That's not going to happen," one of Mr. Hartley's men said. His gun wasn't drawn, which Tarak was glad about, but his hand was at his waist. "The boss wants his daughter back safely."

The man chuckled slightly. Tarak was getting nervous. He worried that the men who had Tillie were going to get nervous and do something that left bodies on the ground. He had hoped that the man would realize he was outnumbered and just give up.

"I know Hartley well enough," he said. "He's never going to just let me go."

“He just wants Tillie back safely. You saw what he was like when he thought she was dead. He’s got no desire to relive such pain.”

For a moment, Tarak thought that this would work. The man’s eyes seemed to soften, as did his grip on Tillie. For a moment, Tarak’s eyes connected with hers, and he tried his best to let her know that she was safe. He was going to do everything that he could to get her out of there safely.

“If he wanted his daughter back, he should have just paid the gold I asked for,” the man said. It was the last words that were spoken before someone fired a shot. Tarak hadn’t had eyes on who fired it, he’d been too focused on Tillie, but as he felt a bullet buzz past his cheek, he knew that it was time to act.

Jumping from his horse, Tarak grabbed the

knife at his belt. He charged toward the man who had Tillie and was dragging her towards his horse. Tarak was proud to see that she was putting up a fight.

He heard the battle cry of his people, and Tarak knew that they were at his back, and he was grateful for them because at that moment, he could think of nothing but Tillie.

“Release her!” he demanded as he came face to face with her captor. The men had scattered after one shot of the gun, but Tarak knew that they would be taken care of.

The man sneered. “Disgusting,” he said. He leaned his face into Tillie’s. “I saw the two of you spending those nights together. What do you think your father would think of you falling in love with an Apache?”

Tarak advanced forward, ready to save Tillie. But before he could get to her, she reared her head up, smashing it into the man's face. Blood sprayed out from his nose as he yelled. He immediately dropped Tillie, who whirled around. There was a fierceness in her eyes, and Tarak was taken aback.

"I don't care what my father thinks," she said. "Tarak is a much better person than you are." Tillie wasn't done. She swung her fist into the man's already damaged face, smashing his nose once more.

Tarak's eyes widened in surprise. He wasn't quite sure what to do next.

Tillie rushed towards him, wrapping her arms around him, as the man that had been holding her was lying on the ground.

“I came to save you,” he said. “But it seems that you didn’t need my help.”

Tillie chuckled, and Tarak was never so glad to hear the sound of laughter in his life. As he pulled away slightly, he looked her up and down, making certain that she was not injured.

“I needed your help!” Tillie said. “I was sure that I was going to die.” There was a small tremor in her voice that angered Tarak more than he could ever explain. He walked towards the man on the ground, knife out, ready to punish him for what he had done. But before he could get too close, Tillie reached out and stopped him.

“Don’t,” she said. She looked down at the man with hatred in her eyes. “He deserves to stand trial for what he’s done.”

Tarak didn't think that he deserved to continue breathing, but he knew that this man had caused Tillie great pain, so he would allow her to make the decision about what to do with him.

"Taza!" she blurted out. "Where's Taza?"

Tarak smiled at her concern before reaching to take her in his arms once more. "He's fine," he said. Tarak didn't know that for certain, but he was sure that he would have felt it if his brother was dead.

"But Chalipun wanted him dead, and he brought men with him! They had knives…."

Tarak pressed his fingers into her hair. "Those were my men," Tarak said.

“Your men?” Tillie asked.

Tarak nodded. “I was worried about Taza’s position. Chalipun was starting to make inroads with the tribe, and I worried that something like this would happen. I started speaking with those men on the road and convinced them that Chalipun was ill. Taza was never in any danger from them.”

“So, he’s okay?” she asked.

He nodded. He wanted to tell her so much, but he didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t been joking when he thought that he thought that he would be the one to save her. He’d worried that there would have been more men and that a big battle would have ensued. He was grateful that it hadn’t.

“Miss Hartley?” one of her father’s men asked. Tarak looked over him. His face was pink as he watched Tillie and Tarak’s embrace. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Tillie said. Tarak noticed her blushing, and he thought that it was because she was embarrassed to be seen with him until he noticed that she was just in a thin gown. He’d never seen Tillie in such attire before.

“We should get you home,” the man said. “Your pa is worried about you. I’m sure that he’s waiting for you….”

Tillie looked torn at the man’s words.

“You should go,” Tarak said. Tillie looked as though she wanted to argue with him. He understood why. So much had happened in

the span of a day, and he too, wanted nothing more than to be with her after almost losing her. “Your father agreed to meet with the tribe tomorrow if I managed to get you home.”

Tillie opened her mouth to say something, but the sound of an unearthly scream captured both of their attention.

Tarak sighed. “I have to help Tarak,” he told her. As they all turned to look at where Chalipun and the rest of the Apache men were, they could see what had caused the screaming. Chalipun had a knife sticking out of his arm, much to Tarak’s surprise.

“What are you going to do with him?” Tillie asked. There was sympathy in her voice that Chalipun didn’t deserve.

“That’s up to Taza and our elders,” Tarak said.

He suspected he knew what was going to happen, but he didn't want to worry Tillie.

Instead, he reached out and cupped her cheek with his hand. "I'll come to your father's with Taza tomorrow," he promised.

Tillie nodded reluctantly. "Promise?" she asked.

He smiled. "Nothing could keep me away."

Tarak meant it. He didn't know what was going to come next. The Apache had a great many problems, and they didn't need Tarak falling in love with the enemy. And Tarak wasn't sure how Tillie felt about him.

They'd never really been able to talk about

what they felt for one another. Tarak hoped to change that soon.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Tillie said.

Tarak nodded. She would. He’d meant what he told her when he said that there was nothing that could keep them apart.

Chapter 39

Tillie had expected another semi-cold reunion with her father, but when she had returned home, he had embraced her frantically, practically weeping as he held her in his arms. It reminded her of when she was a little girl, and he would comfort her when she had a nightmare.

Now, it was morning, and though the sun was streaming into the dining room brightly, it did nothing to alleviate the dark cloud that hung over Tillie. She had been so exhausted that she had fallen asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow, but she couldn't stay asleep for long.

She was anxious about Taza and Tarak's visit.

“The Apache chief is going to ask you to help him broker peace with those in town,” Tillie blurted out over breakfast.

Her father’s warmth towards her had been wonderful, and though she didn’t want to upset him, she couldn’t sit silently back and allow him to run her life any longer. These days, she had seen her life flash across her mind more times than she could count on one hand, and she was done allowing it to be filled with duty and unhappiness.

“What?” her father asked, clearly surprised that she was bringing up the Apache over their eggs.

“Taza is going to ask you to help him, and I think that you should,” she told him.

Her father’s eyes grew wide at the strength of

her voice. Tillie had to thank Johnny, though she doubted that she would ever see him again, as he was now in prison.

“I don’t think we should talk about the Apache,” her father said. “We should talk about something lighter, especially after everything that you have gone through.”

Tillie loved her father, even when she didn’t agree with the choices he thrust upon her, and while she didn’t wish to disappoint him, she couldn’t allow him to steal her happiness from her.

“Taza and his tribe did me a great favor returning me home,” she said.

Her father’s face hardened. “They are the reason that you were put in harm’s way. The chief’s brother,”

Tillie interrupted, “His name is Tarak.”

Her father looked angry at her. “He told me that his cousin was responsible for the threat you faced.”

Tillie sighed. “Johnny was responsible for kidnapping me. He wanted the gold that you had sent me to California with. The same gold he killed James and Henry for. I had that gold because you were trying to marry me off to a man older than you, simply so you could get even more gold.”

Tillie watched her father’s eyes widen. She wasn’t surprised. She had never spoken like this to him before. Even when she had been angry at him for sending her to California, she’d begged and pleaded with him. She’d been meek and submissive.

That Tillie was gone. She had died on the road.

“Are you blaming me for what happened?” her father asked incredulously. “Are you saying that I am the reason you were almost killed?”

Tillie released a heavy sigh. The events of last night, coupled with the events of the last few weeks, were starting to take their toll on her.

“I’m saying that I’m no longer going to sit aside and allow you to make decisions about my life.”

“I’m your father.”

“And you should trust me enough to know my own heart and mind,” Tillie told him. “Because I can assure you that if you don’t, you won’t have a daughter for much longer.”

Her father reeled back as if he had been slapped, and for a moment, Tillie regretted her words. She was angry and frustrated. She wanted her father to listen to her, but she also knew that she had already made her choices, whether he wanted to hear them or not.

Her father looked like he wanted to argue with her, but there must have been something on her face that caused him to snap his lips shut. His eyes, which were so much like her own, looked her up and down. It was almost as if he were seeing her in a new light.

“The Apache are good people,” she said. “And Taza wants to make inroads with those in town. He wants nothing more than to make

peace so that the Apache can exist without the constant fighting in the area."

Her father sighed. "I don't know what I would be able to do," he said.

"You can talk to the people of the town. They'll listen to you."

Her father seemed to be mulling over her words. She wished that he would simply agree to what she was saying because he trusted her enough to know that this was the right thing to do. But she supposed that she couldn't expect things to change so soon.

"The Apache have killed many townspeople's family members. I don't know if my words will matter. There's a lot of hate there."

Tillie had been afraid of that. She had heard rumblings in the church about the Apache. “All I am asking you to do is to listen to Taza with an open mind,” she said.

Her father looked at her, and for a moment, she wondered if he was going to tell her no. She did her best to appear serious and not squirm in her seat.

“Fine,” her father said, throwing up his hands. “I suppose that I have to trust you.”

Tillie took a deep breath before speaking again. She knew that the next part might not go even as remotely well as convincing her father to talk to Taza.

“There’s something else that we need to discuss,” she told her father. Under the table,

Tillie clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking.

“Oh?” her father asked. He seemed nervous about whatever she was going to say next.

“I’m not going to California,” she said.

Her father’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “I know,” he said. “I told you that I would write to your fiancé….”

Tillie shook her head. “I’m not marrying him,” she told her father.

He sighed in frustrating. “Tillie, we’ve already discussed this,” he said. “I want to give you time to rest, but I’ve already made the arrangements.”

“I never agreed to marry him,” Tillie said. “And I won’t. I should have told you that before you sent me away the first time.” Though Tillie was glad that she hadn’t. If she had, she wouldn’t have met Tarak, and she wouldn’t have known what she would be missing if she went along with what her father wanted from her.

“You can’t just break your promise like that,” her father said. His voice was even, but Tillie could hear the anger in it. She knew that her father wanted her to marry this man in California as a way to expand his business relationship, but Tillie didn’t want her happiness used as a pawn to make her father money that he didn’t need.

“I never made the promise,” she said. “And after everything that happened, I don’t want to spend the rest of my life unhappy. I want to have a marriage like you and Ma, full of love

and happiness.”

Her father ran a hand through his gray hair. He looked exhausted, and for the first time, Tillie wondered about the toll her disappearance had taken on him.

“I don’t want you to be unhappy,” he told her.

Tillie smiled. She reached out to grab her father’s hand. “I’ve fallen in love, Pa,” she said.

Her father looked even more surprised. “What?” he asked.

“I’m in love with someone, and I wish to marry him.”

“Who?” her father asked.

Tillie bit her lip. She didn’t know what her father was going to say next, but this morning, as she had laid in her bed, thinking about everything that had happened, she had known that she would be with Taza, as long as he wanted her, no matter what her father told her.

“His name is Tarak,” she said.

Her father looked as though he were going to keel over right at the table. “Pa?” she asked. She squeezed his hand to try and get him to speak to her.

But he didn’t. He got up from his seat and walked over to where he kept his whiskey.

“I know that this might not be what you wanted for me,” she said. “But Tarak is a good man. He’s saved me so many times, and I’m pretty sure that he loves me just as much as I love him.”

Her father said nothing. He poured a large glass of whiskey and took a deep gulp.

“I’m not asking your permission,” Tillie said. “I am going to be with Tarak no matter what you say, but I’d rather have your blessing. You’re the only parent that I have, and I don’t want us to be estranged from one another.”

He remained quiet, but he turned to look at her. His dark eyes examined her, and Tillie tried her best to appear strong. Inside, she felt like a scared little girl. She loved Tarak dearly, and she couldn’t live without him. She prayed

that he would be willing to take the same chance on her that she was taking on him. But even if he didn't, Tillie knew that she couldn't marry another man.

"I suppose that I should talk to this Tarak," her father said. "Find out if he's good enough for you."

It was Tillie's turn to be surprised. She nearly fell out of her seat. "Really?" she asked.

Her father finished his large glass of whiskey. Tillie knew that he wasn't happy with what she was saying, but she appreciated that he was trying.

"I don't want to lose you, Tillie," he told her, voice cracking slightly.

Tillie got up and walked towards him. Before he could say anything, she wrapped her arms around her father, squeezing him tightly as if she were a little girl again.

“You won’t,” she whispered.

But he would. One way or another, Tillie was moving on to the next phase in her life, and that meant that she would have to leave parts of her girlhood behind.

Epilogue

“Are you sure that you don’t want me to go with you?” Tarak asked. He and Taza stood outside of Tillie’s grand home. It was midday, and the Arizona sun was high in the sky. The day was idyllic in many ways, and it only served to increase Tarak’s anxiety.

“I don’t want to scare him,” Taza said. “It’s why I asked the others to stay behind.”

Tarak rolled his eyes. He had met Tillie’s father, and he suspected that the man wasn’t someone who scared easily.

“You can’t go in there alone,” Tarak said. He hadn’t been away from Taza’s size since he had been kidnapped, much to Taza’s

annoyance. “What if he’s waiting.”

Taza rolled his eyes. “He is waiting,” he said. “He’s waiting for me to come inside and tell him what it is that I want.”

“You shouldn’t have left the tribe so soon,” Tarak said.

Taza sighed. Tarak knew that he felt guilty for leaving the elders to deal with the problem of Chalipun. Tarak still didn’t know what they would do with him. There was talk of everything from scalping to exile. Taza hadn’t given his opinion of what he wanted to happen, and Tarak knew that his brother had done that on purpose.

“The elders have things well in hand,” Taza said.

Tarak snorted. “That’s what you said before, and you ended up kidnapped.”

Taza gave him a small smile. “I don’t see them letting him off so easily this time around,” Taza said. “There’s talk of sending him to a tribe out east.”

Tarak didn’t like the idea of Chalipun being on the loose, but there wasn’t much that he could do about it. Taza was hesitant to kill their cousin, and everyone agreed that exile would be akin to death to Chalipun. He would be shunned by the Apache people for the rest of his life.

“You should take this time to talk to Tillie,” Taza said.

Tarak turned to look at his brother. They hadn't spoken about Tillie at all. Her father's men had taken her home, and Tarak and Taza had had a great many things to deal with on their own. They'd had to do it quickly before the sheriff had come to take away the other men. The Apache had learned long ago not to be around when the law came.

"I thought that you didn't like Tillie," Tarak said. "In fact, I remember you telling me to stay away from her."

Taza sighed. "The events of the last day made me think that maybe I was wrong."

Tarak was surprised by his brother's words. He'd decided yesterday when he had been so close to losing Tillie, that he didn't care what Taza thought. If Tillie would be with him, he would do whatever he could to be with her. He knew that he couldn't live without her.

“I mean it,” Taza said. He turned to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Tillie loves you, and you love her. It isn’t right for me to get in the way of that.”

Tarak sighed. “Tillie’s promised to another man,” he told his brother. “She was on the way to marry him when the bandits came upon her.”

Taza’s face didn’t change. “Well,” he said. “I suppose that you will have to find a way to convince her to marry you.”

Tarak snorted. “I don’t know if Tillie is ready to give up her life and become an Apache.” Tarak also didn’t know if the Apache would accept her. He’d spent a lot of time thinking about what he and Tillie were going to do.

Taza didn't look so convinced. "I don't know," he said. "If you ask her, she may surprise you. Take my advice, don't let Tillie get away."

Tarak said nothing as Taza knocked on the door. It didn't matter what he wanted. Tillie would be the one who made the decisions about their future.

"Now," Taza said. "It's time for me to figure out how best to convince her father to help us. So, it might be better if you don't make any overtures towards Tillie until after we speak."

"I wasn't sure if you would come," Tillie said. Taza was inside speaking with her father, who had greeted them warmly. Tillie had convinced him to take a walk around her

father's lands.

"I told you I would," he said.

Tillie was dressed in a purple gown embroidered with some sort of flower. It was the finest that he had ever seen her in and served to highlight to Tarak how different their worlds were.

He didn't know if she would be interested in giving up all of her wealth to be with him, and though he would give up a great deal for her, he couldn't abandon his tribe. Until Taza took a wife and had children, he was needed.

"I thought maybe you would be unable to get away," she said.

“Taza was determined to come and speak with your father, and I was determined to see you,” he told her.

Tillie’s cheeks turned pink. She was shyer than he could remember her being.

“I’m glad,” she said.

“Me too,” he told her. He wanted to reach out and touch her hand, or her cheek, or the blond curls that were artfully framing her face. But he wasn’t sure if that was what she wanted. Tarak knew that Tillie’s people were much odder about physical affection than the Apache.

They walked for a bit in silence until Tarak couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Has your father said anything about sending you back to California?” he asked.

Tillie gave him an odd look. It was one that he couldn’t quite read. “He wants to send me back,” she said.

“And you?” Tarak asked. He hadn’t had a chance to think about what he was going to say to her. He wished he had. He wanted to find the right words to convince her to leave the life that she knew and take a chance on the life that he could give her. Walking with her, he wondered if he even stood a chance. Tarak might be Apache, but he did know that Tillie lived a life of luxury.

Tillie turned to look at him. Her dark blue eyes were lovelier than ever. “I told him that I’m not going to California,” she said.

“You did?” Tarak asked. In some ways, he was surprised. Tillie was wild and fierce in many ways, but he knew that when it came to her father, she believed that she needed to make certain concessions.

But something had changed. Tarak could tell. There was a gleam of mischief in her eyes.

“I did,” Tillie said. “I told him that I am in love with someone else.”

Tarak couldn’t stop the slow smile unfurling on his face. He and Tillie hadn’t said those words to one another yet, but he suspected that she was talking about him. “Oh, really?” he asked. He reached out and caressed one of her curls. “And who might this be?”

As usual, Tillie did what Tarak least expected.

She reached up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. The move was sudden, and it stunned him. The feel of Tillie's lips on his was feather-light and over before he could think too much of it.

"Obviously," she said as she pulled away. "It's you."

Tarak smiled. He cupped her cheek and brought her face towards his own. He pressed his lips more firmly to hers and allowed them to have a moment to savor their closeness. Tillie smelled of lavender and vanilla, and Tarak enjoyed the feel of her smooth skin before he pulled away from her.

"Do you have anything to say?" Tillie asked. Her navy eyes were sparkling, and Tarak felt as if his chest was going to explode out of his chest at any moment.

“I love you,” Tarak told her. “I think I fell in love with you when you showed such strength in the face of danger.”

Tillie laughed lightly. “It didn’t seem like you liked me very much. I was terrified that you were going to leave me on the side of the road to fend for myself.”

Tarak felt terrible about the fact that he had done that. “I was scared,” he told her. “I was worried that you might be a bad omen.” Tarak remembered the feeling that he had gotten right before he had seen Tillie for the first time. At the time, he hadn’t realized that what he felt was his future changing for the better.

“And now?” Tillie asked.

“Now, I don’t know what to do,” he told her.

Tarak wasn't normally one to be so open about his feelings. He had been taught to exude strength. That was what the Apache expected of their chief's second. But being around Tillie was different. He always felt like he could be himself when he was with her. He wasn't the brother of the Apache chief. He was just Tarak.

"What do you mean?" Tillie asked. "Are you unsure about me? I know that when we were on the road, you were worried about what the men would think."

Tarak sighed. "I'm not worried about that anymore," he said. "I think after everything that's happened, there's not a single Apache who would question your presence." Tarak didn't actually know how the Apache would react to Tillie being with him, hopefully, as his wife.

"Then, what?" Tillie asked. "Because I think

I've made it clear to you that I love you. I want a future with you."

Tarak wished that he could just enjoy her words. He wanted them to be happy and together, but he needed Tillie to understand what that meant.

"I want to marry you," Tarak said.

Tillie breathed in sharply. She opened her mouth to speak, but Tarak placed a finger across her lips to stop her. He needed to get the words out first.

"But I want you to understand what that would mean," he told her.

She nodded.

“I can’t leave the tribe,” he told her. “Taza needs me, and even if he didn’t, I’m an Apache. I don’t think that I could leave the tribe. I know that might not be fair, but I don’t think that I would ever be accepted in your world.”

Tarak released a heavy breath. He opened his mouth to tell Tillie what she would be in for if he married him, but before he could, he felt her finger against his lips once more.

“I understand,” she said.

“I don’t think you do,” he told her. “Marrying me, living with the tribe, it won’t be like the life that you have now.”

“I know that,” Tillie said. “All of this doesn’t matter to me.” She swept her hand around. Tillie grabbed his hands in her own. “I love you, and when I nearly died, all I could think of was the fact that we would never see each other again. Tarak, I would follow you to the end of the world if that was what it took.”

“Really?” Tarak asked.

Tillie smiled and nodded. “I love you,” she said.

Tarak reached out to kiss her once more, but Tillie pulled back.

“Ask me again,” she commanded.

“What?” Tarak asked.

“Ask me to marry you.”

Tarak laughed. “Tillie Hartley, will you marry me?” he asked her.

Tillie laughed. It was the only warning Tarak had before she threw herself into his arms. “I love you,” she said before kissing him.

“I love you,” he told her. He pressed a kiss to her lips. Tarak didn’t know what the future would bring for them, but he knew that whatever came their way, they would be able to get through it. They had already gotten through so much, and Tarak believed that they deserved some happiness.

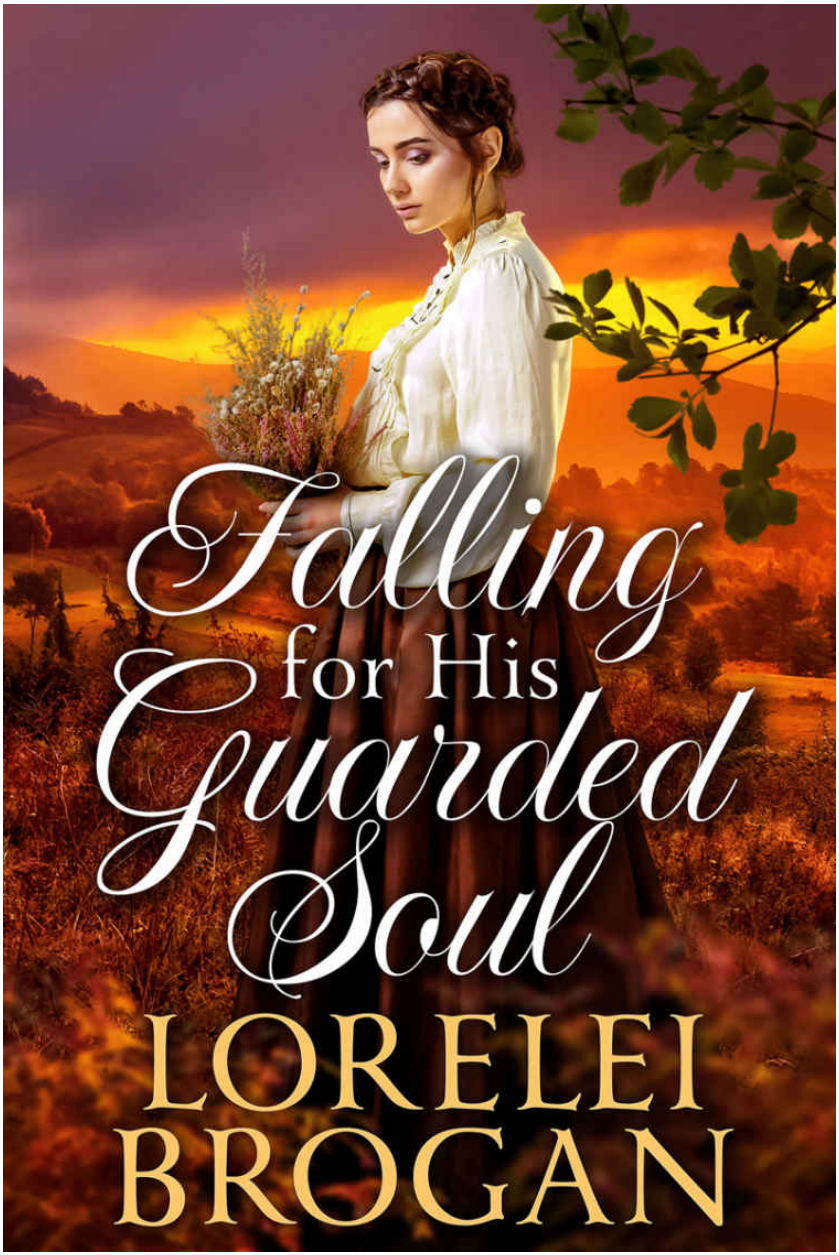
THE END

Can't get enough of Tillie and Tarak? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

Will Tillie and Tarak be able to make a marriage work after all, despite coming from different worlds?
Will Tillie regret leaving her life behind? Will she be embraced and accepted by Tarak's tribe
What will happen between Tillie and her father? Will she find a way to stay in touch?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
http://loreleibrogan.com/tarak

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from "**Falling for His Guarded Soul**", my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


Falling
for His
Guarded
Soul
LORELEI
BROGAN

Falling for His Guarded Soul

Introduction

Tillie Acton is struggling to cope with the loss of both her brother and the man she intended to marry. Adding to her misery, when financial ruin strikes her family her parents suggest she become a mail-order bride. However, marrying a man she doesn't love is out of the question for her. Determined to live life on her own terms, she is hired as a caretaker for Max Stone, a young rancher who is bed-bound due to a terrible horse accident. Tille finds herself dealing with a bitter and ungrateful man who is far from what she expected, but everything is about to change

forever… Could she eventually see past Max's flaws and find the love she always hoped for?

After a tragic accident robbed him of his ability to walk, Max has been spending his days in bed overwhelmed by his grief. When his mother presents Tillie as his new caretaker, Max has no reason to believe she'll be any different from the previous ones that couldn't handle him. In reality, he couldn't be more mistaken... They both have a deep love for horses, which is the first of many things they share. Max never imagined Tillie's bubbly personality and positive outlook on life would inspire him to embark on a journey towards recovery. Soon, he begins to feel a rush of love

every time he sees her... but could Tillie ever feel the same?

Love is inevitable for Tillie and Max but fate throws someone in their path intent on shattering the future they only dare dream of. Wanting to protect what lies between them, they try to keep their love a secret, but their efforts will be in vain... Will love prevail when an enemy disguised as a friend threatens their happily ever after??

Chapter 1

Tillie Acton laid awake in her bed, separated from her three younger siblings with a sheet. The cloth hung from the ceiling to the floor as a pretend wall. It first appeared when Tillie turned twenty-one to make her feel as if she had her own bedroom. It was only meant to be temporary since she planned to be moving out when she married her beau Jacob Nash, but those plans were ruined when Jacob died.

Her brother Seth was older and deserved his own room before Tillie. He decided a bed in the barn would be a perfect solution. He was always a gentleman and didn't think twice about making a sacrifice for his sister.

"Jenny peed her bed again," Dougie teased, "she's a baby and should still be in a cot with rails."

Lara, who shared a bed with her seven-year-old sister, joined in the chants. “Jenny peed the bed. Jenny peed the bed. Jenny is a stinky baby.”

Tillie heard Jenny beginning to cry, and she knew it was time to break up the shenanigans. Jenny was deeply affected when her big brother died only two years earlier. Seth was the oldest Acton child, and Jenny was the youngest.

He was like a father to her, and it was taking time for her to accept his absence. Bedwetting was one of the things that came from her grief, and being teased by Dougie and Lara didn’t help.

“I’m climbing out of bed, and when I come in there, I want Dougie and Lara downstairs.

Mother needs help with early chores," Tillie called out. "There is more than enough work to keep the two of you busy."

Tillie heard the pattering of feet and knew the children had done as ordered. Jenny had a problem and to each one of those was a solution. After dealing with the death of two loved ones, she focused on challenges she could fix. Unable to do anything when death was inevitable for Jacob and Seth was frustrating. Since then, Tillie was intent on solving problems both big and small.

Tillie pulled a muslin cap over her reddish-brown hair and rubbed the sleep out of her green eyes.

"Here I come, Jenny," she said before pulling aside the sheet.

Seth called Jenny Sprout, and the first time Tillie used the nickname, she received a nasty glance. She did insist on a new nickname, so Tillie called her Sapling.

“We have a problem, Sapling, and what do we do when one of those comes along?”

“Solve it. I try, but I wake up, and it happened again. Lara feels it’s because we’re in the same bed, and then she tells Dougie. Then they tease me and tell me I should go back to the crib.”

Jenny sat with her legs crossed and her brown braids disheveled. Tillie hated to see her sister distressed at such a young age. Life was long, and worrying wasn’t the way it should start.

“First thing we do is put some clean clothes on you. Good thing we had the washboard out

yesterday. As we clean up, we're going to talk about Seth. Let's tell stories about what you liked best about Seth. You can tell me what he did that made you laugh, and we just might end up giggling. We can keep him alive with memories that make you happy and not sad."

"I don't see how that will keep me from wetting the bed," Jenny remarked.

"You've been holding thoughts of Seth inside, and it's time we let them out. They've been sneaking out in the form of pee at night. I'm not positive it will work, but it's worth a try. What do you say, Sapling?"

"I say, let's give it a try!"

Three nights passed, and Jenny didn't wet her bed. The three children were milking cows in the barn when Tillie's mother and father invited her to the table for a chat. Frank worked hard on the family dairy farm while Edna Acton tended the garden and the children. They battled snowstorms, disease among the cows, and the death of their eldest son. When one calamity ended, another popped up to take its place.

"I don't like the looks on your faces," Tillie fretted. "Have you taken ill again, Mother?"

"No, I think your father and I are just exhausted, and it's beginning to show," she replied.

She was referring to the bags under their eyes and the greying of their hair.

“It’s been a couple of years since both Seth and Jacob died, and we couldn’t have survived without your help. You picked up the slack in their absence, and we’re both proud,” Tillie’s father declared. “Thing is, we think it’s time for you to move on. It’s for your sake and ours. We want you to have a life of your own, and we’d like to have one less mouth to feed. Folks are moving out of Herkimer, New York, to escape the harsh winters. That means we sell fewer dairy products.”

“Don’t think for a second we don’t love you. If you aim to stay in Herkimer, we’ll find a way to make it work. Your father suggested being one of those mail-order brides. Imagine the adventure. Think of the opportunities to see things that you’ve only imagined. I was at the general store and picked up this copy of The Marital Times.”

Tillie lowered her head and put her hands calmly on the table. She started to shake with laughter. “There is no way I’m traveling

thousands of miles to marry a man I don't know. I was in love once, and I know what that feels like. I'll marry for love, or I won't marry at all. Did the two of you marry for love?" she asked.

Edna and Frank looked at each other and nodded their heads.

"It's a problem, and I'll find a solution. I'll be in the barn with the children while I think of a suitable plan. I know you have the best intentions, and I understand completely. It's time for you to push this little bird from the nest." Tillie kissed both parents on the head.

As she walked to the barn, Tillie recounted one of the last conversations she had with Jacob.

"You haven't left my side since I took ill. You

heard what Doc said, I ain't getting better. I'm dying, and I don't want you climbing into my grave with me. You have more to offer than Herkimer has to give. Make me proud, and I'll be looking down at you and help if I can."

"I wish I were a doctor so I could cure you," Tillie said.

"I know how you are; you think every problem has a solution. There's not a way to fix me, but you've made being sick a lot more pleasant than it could have been. You have a gift, and don't let it go to waste. My love for you can't do a lot of good after I'm gone, but someone will be lucky and fall in love with you. Use your love and your skills. I believe in you."

That was one of the last days that Jacob was lucid enough to speak.

A spark was ignited in Tillie's mind. It wasn't the first time she had the idea, but now was the time to act on it. She burst back into the kitchen, where her parents were still sitting at the table.

"You hardly had time to make it to the barn," Frank Acton remarked. "From the look on your face, I can see that you've come up with a solution."

"Do tell," Edna begged.

"I want to go to school and become a nurse! I've cared for both Jacob and Seth until they died. This is a way of making something good out of a devastating time in my life."

Mr. Acton rubbed his face. "There is nothing that I'd like more than to send you to nursing school, but I can't afford that without taking

food off the table."

Tillie was silent for a moment as she considered what she had just asked. "I don't know what I was thinking. I understand where you're coming from."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could do more," he said.

Tillie gave her father a reassuring hug before making it out to the barn. The children milked cows and created mayhem. They squirted the barn cats with cow's milk and laughed at the hijinx. She went to the stable on the far end of the barn and tended to her beloved horse, Margie. Tillie created beautiful memories with Margie. When she did leave Herkimer, it would be difficult to say goodbye.

Tillie rarely had a hard time falling asleep. The dulcet sounds the children made as they slept usually put her to sleep. She decided to creep down the stairs for a glass of milk and a heel of leftover bread.

On the kitchen table was the copy of *The Marital Times* that her mother brought home. It had blown open to the last page, and the moon shined on an advertisement. It was for a caretaker. She reached down to pick it up when her mother entered the room and startled her.

“Mother, you scared me.”

“Want some company? It must be the full moon keeping me up because I couldn’t sleep either. Let’s take a look at some of the men seeking brides. It’s just us girls, and it will be fun,” Mrs. Acton said.

“Sure, but I saw one at the back of the magazine that seemed interesting,” Tillie mentioned.

“We’ll look at that one too. I’ll read then, and you tell me if you think they sound good.

Hearty woman needed. Cold Wyoming winters. 45-year-old man seeking a wife. Cooking, cleaning, help in the barn. Five children already and more wanted.

“No way. Sounds like he needs a slave and not a wife,” she commented.

A woman built to bear children. A 40-year-old widower needs help on a pig farm. Cooking, canning, and general help with the animals.

“No way.” Tillie laughed. “I hate pigs, and I don’t want to bear children for an old man I don’t love. Go to the last page and read the one in the bottom corner with the bold print.”

Her mother cleared her throat.

Wanted, patient, determined, physically strong, and kind woman to care for my son. He was in a terrible horse accident and may never walk again. Ranch in Thistle Texas near Austin. Room and three meals per day provided. Generous stipend.

“When I came into the kitchen, the magazine was blown open to that page. The moon showed on that advertisement, which sounds perfect. It’s too ideal to be a coincidence. I think my guardian angels Seth and Jacob are sending me a sign.”

“Believe what you want, darling, but it does sound like something that would suit you.”

Tillie sent an introductory letter to Nell Stone, the boy’s mother. She described what she did every day in helping her mother with the garden and three young children. Besides, she wrote of her taking care of two people close to her who died. With creativity and strength, she managed to prop them up and see as many sunsets as possible. Tillie told Nell that she would be available as soon as possible to travel to Thistle.

Tillie figured Nell might be looking for someone older than twenty-three with more experience. Her fingers were crossed as she waited for a return post. Sooner than she even thought possible, a reply arrived. She ran

inside the house like her hair was on fire with the unopened note. The children were in the barn with her father.

“Should I read it aloud?” Tillie asked her mother.

“You had better, or I’m going to rip it out of your hands!” Edna exclaimed.

Tillie cleared her throat

Dear Miss Acton,

I was pleased to receive your response to the advertisement in the Marital Times. I had a stack of responses, and when I read yours, I was relieved. Your youth and stamina are just what I’m looking for. I’ve had many nurses and

experienced caretakers come to the Stone Ranch, but they left. Max was too much of a challenge for them. You have an advantage with three younger siblings.

Consider this letter a formal invitation. I have a husband, two daughters, and a slew of ranch hands. We will welcome you with open arms. However, Max may take some time to get used to yet another caretaker.

Allow me to describe the Stone Ranch …

Tillie finished the letter, which described Thistle Texas and the Stone Ranch. When she mentioned it covered one thousand acres, Edna's eyes popped. She continued reading, and in addition to heads of cattle numbering above two hundred and fifty, they had a stable of horses. Apparently, they were Max's favorites, which meant she would have something in common with the boy.

Tillie replied immediately to accept Mrs. Stone's offer. She spent the next weeks packing her trunk and preparing for her first train ride. It was going to be a long trip even if she were an experienced traveler. She wasn't terribly nervous and felt ready to leave Herkimer. When her father suggested, it she was taken aback, but now she was glad he did.

Goodbyes were tearful, and Tillie held out hope that she would see everyone again someday. That may not have been possible, but it made saying goodbye a whole lot easier.

Chapter 2

Tillie traveled from Herkimer to New York City, which was pretty darn exciting. Herkimer had no buildings taller than a couple of stories. The ones she saw were twenty stories or more. It was a dizzying sight. She had to get off the train, claim her trunks and get on a second train to bring her to Austin, Texas.

Tillie shared a bench in the station with an elderly couple. Mr. and Mrs. Burk had thirty minutes to wait before boarding the train to Texas. They were moving to Texas to live out the rest of their years on their son's cattle ranch. The Burks held hands, and they told of being married thirty years.

"If you don't mind me asking, do you ever tire of each other?" Tillie asked. "It looks to me

like you're still smitten like a pair of teenagers. I'm asking because I hope to someday meet a man to marry me. If we still look at each other like you do, it will be a dream come true."

Mrs. Burk giggled. "Over thirty years, we've tired of each other, but then we realize there's no one else either of us would want to be with. I fell in love with Leonard the very first time I saw him and never looked away."

Mr. Burke didn't say much; he just nodded and smiled. He seemed unwell.

"We've been told Leonard might not make it through the trip, but we thought we'd try. He wouldn't allow me to travel alone, and he wants to meet his only grandson. He's named Leonard."

“I pray he can sleep on the train,” Tillie said.

“He can lean on my shoulder and sleep in a seated position, I suppose.”

Tillie looked down at her ticket, which was for a sleeping car all the way to Austin. The Stone family were well-off and had arranged her travel. She thought it was silly for a healthy twenty-three-year-old to travel with a bed while a man who needed it was forced to sleep sitting up.

“I have a proposition for you, Mrs. Burk. I’ve never traveled a long distance by train. I want to experience it in its entirety. I want to smell everything and see everything. Sleeping is the farthest thing from my mind, but I have a problem,” Tillie explained.

“What is your problem, dear?” Mrs. Burk

asked.

“I have a sleeper car in first class, and I was hoping Mr. Burk might swap tickets with me. I’ve heard they’re plenty roomy, and perhaps you can squeeze in next to him.”

Mrs. Burk’s eyes glowed and grew dewy. “You must be an angel sent from heaven. That would mean the chances are good that Leonard will meet his namesake.”

Mrs. Burk gave Tillie a warm embrace as they exchanged tickets. To her, it was just another solution that needed fixing.

Tillie was astounded by the scenery as it

passed along the way to Texas. The soot clouded the windows some, and the train was noisy. Despite the drawbacks, Tillie never regretted swapping her ticket.

The fog rolled down from the mountains in West Virginia. North Carolina was greener than Herkimer ever was in the springtime, and the heat increased as they moved west. A man from the train company was headed home to Dallas, and he told Tillie where they were and what to look for. He had been on the exact route several times.

“Do you have lakes and rivers in Herkimer?” he asked.

“Sure we do. We have a pond on our farm that freezes in winter,” Tillie replied.

“You ain’t seen nothing like the Mississippi

River. It's too big to freeze, and it's too warm where we're crossing."

"Is there a bridge?"

"Sure is, and I hope it holds." He smiled because he was teasing.

Tillie realized what a small life she lived in Herkimer that was growing with each mile she traveled. Crossing the Mississippi was something she never expected to do. It was something her father hadn't done or his father. She was filled with excitement and anticipation.

Mrs. Stone said Max was too much for some to handle, but she was confident in herself. Her brother Dougie was a handful at times, but he never got the best of her. Her brother was nine, and she guessed Max would be about the

same. They passed meadows with so many flowers that it looked like a rug had been rolled out. America was so lovely that Tillie was astounded when the porter came through and announced they were crossing into Texas.

“That was fast!” Tillie exclaimed.

“Yup. It tends to be that way on your first trip.”

Tillie nodded her head. “I’d do it all over again if given the chance. How soon to Austin?”

“Texas is a big place. The sun will set and rise before we get to Austin. In all my days riding these rails, I’ve never come across someone like you.”

“I hope that’s a compliment,” Tillie said.

“It is, young lady. You have such wonder and optimism. I don’t think there’s a scared bone in your body.”

“I’m scared; I’ve been through some things just like everyone else. I just don’t show it. Why dwell on what’s not right in front of you?” Tillie chirped.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure. I’m going to get some shut-eye because my stop will be in an hour or two.” He pulled his hat down.

Tillie’s excitement wore thin when the sun began to set. She didn’t want to miss a thing, but she was physically unable to keep her eyes open. She dreamed about her brother Seth who was also her best friend. It was just the

two of them for so long, and then came the three little ones.

They relied on each other for support and were always able to make each other laugh. It was during their years together that Tillie learned the importance of laughter. Taking the little things too seriously darkened the soul and was a waste of precious time.

“I don’t want you to get sick, Tillie. Just let me be because I’m going to die anyway,” Seth spoke, although his voice was faint.

“I tended to Jacob didn’t I? So the doc says I’m immune. I don’t really know what the heck that word means, but I think it means I won’t get sick. You’d die of boredom if I left,” Tillie joked.

Seth laughed. “It’s my death bed. I could do without the jokes.”

“Not a chance. Doc says you have a few days left where you’ll be awake enough to talk. If I leave, you won’t have anyone here to listen to your silly jokes.”

“When you get it in your head to do something, there’s no convincing you otherwise. I worry about Mother and Father after I’m gone, but I don’t worry about you. You have a gift, Tillie, and I hope you go on to share it with as many people as possible,” Seth managed to say as he touched his sister’s arm.

“I expect to see you again someday.”

“Don’t talk crazy,” Seth urged. “We both know I’m going to die.”

“I know that, but we’ll see each other in heaven. I know we will,” Tillie promised.

“Not for a long time. I have to come up with some new jokes while I’m up there, and you have work to do. I want you to know love again like Jacob would have wanted. One thing’s for sure. You have to have a son and name him Seth.”

Tillie pushed away tears from her cat-like eyes. “I will. I promise.”

“Don’t let anyone ever tell you that you’re less than you are.”

Seth had exhausted himself by speaking, so he closed his eyes. Days later, he drew his last breath.

The train jerked, and Tillie woke up. The man next to her was gone, having gotten off at his stop while she was sleeping. The train screeched and lurched before coming to a complete stop.

“Last stop. Austin, Texas,” the porter announced in a long slow drawl. “Ya’ll are out of luck if you missed your stop while sleeping. We ain’t going back, so you’ll have to walk.”

Since leaving Herkimer, Tillie hadn’t felt nervous or scared in the least. Now, things were changing, and it was the worst possible time. Where were her guardian angels when she needed them?

Folk began filing off the train, so Tillie did the same. She grabbed her blue wool coat that had been used in Herkimer for five consecutive winters. Actually, it had been used in fall and spring, too, when the weather called for it.

Summers back home were hot, and she knew to expect the same in Texas. It was not even May yet, so she assumed she'd need the coat for a couple more weeks at least. It was stale, sticky, and warm on the train, but she expected to be met with cooler air when she stepped onto the platform.

As she stepped on the steady ground, there was no cool air but dry, and it lingered somewhere between warm and hot. She pulled her bonnet tight and tried pinning her hair up where it was supposed to be. Tillie was scheduled to be picked up by a man who was instructed to fetch a woman in a green bonnet.

"Hello, ma'am. You must be heading to …"

Tillie finished his sentence. "I'm going to the Stone Ranch in Thistle. You must have been sent to collect me. I heard you would

recognize me."

The man's eyes lit up when he heard she was going to the Stone Ranch. He must have been pleased that he came upon the right woman.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll load your trunk and take your bag." He gestured towards his rickety wagon. "Then we'll be off to the Stone Ranch,"

He reached for Tillie's bag, but she refused to let go. He hadn't used her name, and the wagon did not appear as something Nell Stone would have sent. Her father had always said that if something seemed wrong, it likely was. She scanned the dwindling crowd for someone who could come to her aid.

"I'm not about to let a lady carry her own bag. Let go." His toothless grin showed a touch of frustration.

“Who sent you?”

“Mrs. Stone,” he replied.

“What is her first name, and what is mine? What garment were you told to look out for?”

The man looked nervous, and when he saw a gentleman tap Tillie on the shoulder, he bolted.

“Miss Acton?” A man with graying hair that peeked from beneath his black hat stood behind Tillie. “I’m Michael, and I’ve been sent by Mrs. Stone to bring you back to the ranch. The carriage is waiting, and it should take only a couple of hours.”

“You don’t know how good it is to meet you. I almost got swindled on my first day in Texas.”

“It isn’t your fault, Miss Acton. People who’ve lived their lives in Texas still get hoodwinked now and then. It happens a lot around the train depot when people are thinking about everything but getting swindled.”

Together they walked to retrieve Tillie’s trunk. Michael had a cart on wheels to carry it, which he said was safer than putting it in the hands of strangers. He joked that his back wasn’t what it used to be. He used to be able to carry a trunk over each shoulder.

Tillie was about to step into the shiny black carriage. “Michael, would you mind terribly if I rode up front with you? I’ve been in that metal tube for over a week, and I need the fresh air.”

“Not at all, ma’am. I’ll help you up.”

“Thank you!”

Tillie and Michael exchanged pleasantries and light conversation. She learned that she would be the fifth caretaker for Max in as many months. He had been to Austin to pick up nurses and even one doctor. Within a couple of weeks, he was returning them to the train depot, and it seemed like they couldn’t leave fast enough.

“I think you’ll be different, Miss Acton,” Michael commented.

“I bet you said that to every caretaker.”

“No, I really didn’t. You smile a lot easier than any of them did, and you’re the only one who wanted to sit up front. I realize I shouldn’t be commenting on anyone in the Stone family, but I will anyway. Max Stone is a handful. He was when he could walk, and I’d say he’s more difficult when he’s spending his days in bed,” Michael warned.

“The first thing I’ll do is get that boy out of bed. I’m surprised his mother and father haven’t done it sooner,” Tillie said.

Tillie couldn’t get over the open spaces. It sure wasn’t like Herkimer, and it was nothing like New York City. When there were trees, they were massive oaks with vines hanging from the branches. Michael said they were referred to as live oaks. Tillie thought that meant the other oaks weren’t alive, and she knew that wasn’t true.

There was a lot to learn about Texas before it felt like home.

Chapter 3

“The Stone Ranch is coming into view. Don’t be scared; it’s likely bigger than the town you came from. Mrs. Stone mentioned it, but I forgot,” Michael said.

“It’s Herkimer. There would be no reason for you to have ever heard it before. I have mostly good memories of growing up there, so I’m not complaining. At twenty-three, I was ready to try something new,” Tillie commented. “I tried to imagine what one thousand acres looked like, and I didn’t imagine very well. How did Mr. Stone get all this land?”

“A little luck and a lot of hard work.”

Michael veered the team up a long drive lined

with flowering trees. The scent in the air changed, which was because of the river that ran down the other side of the ranch. A white clapboard house, although it was more than a house, came into view. With barns and a stable peeking out from beyond, it resembled a small town. It was larger than Herkimer.

“I’ll drive right up to the house where Mrs. Stone will meet you. It’s been a pleasure, Miss Acton.” Michael tipped his hat.

“Please, call me Tillie. I hope everyone at the Stone Ranch doesn’t insist on calling me Miss Acton. Considering his age, it might be appropriate for Max to address me formally.”

Michael raised his eyebrows, but Tillie wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by the gesture. He pulled up in front of the house, and a tall, graceful woman waved her arms.

“This is it. Your trunk will be delivered to your room. We’re sure to run into each other. I hope I’m not taking you back to Austin in a week.” Michael ran around and helped Tillie down from the wagon.

Mrs. Stone looked confused as she put her hands on her hips. She eventually ran down the steps to greet Tillie.

“Welcome to the Stone Ranch. I’m Mrs. Stone, and I’m so happy to finally have you here. How do you prefer to be addressed?”

“I’m most comfortable being called Tillie. You can choose how you wish Max to address me. Many parents prefer their children use the more formal address.”

Mrs. Stone chuckled. “Max stopped doing

what I said when he was ten. He can address you as he chooses. Was there a problem with the inside of the carriage? It's usually cleaned regularly, and if that wasn't the case, then I'll get right on it."

That explained why Mrs. Stone looked confused. She expected Tillie to come out of the carriage. Instead, she was riding atop it.

"Oh, no. It was nothing like that. I'm sure it was perfectly clean inside, but I preferred breathing in the fresh air. The train ride was exciting, but more than a week of breathing soot got to me," Tillie explained.

"Did the sleeping car make it more manageable?" Mrs. Stone asked.

Tillie was having a hard time keeping her jaw from dropping. She had never seen such

grandeur and wealth up close. If she didn't know better, she'd think she was about to enter a castle. Tillie remembered she had been asked a question. Her surroundings were making it difficult to concentrate.

"Well, you see. I didn't use the sleeping car."

"Was it not arranged?' Mrs. Stone asked. "I'll be furious if my instructions weren't followed."

"No, it was arranged, but I ran into a man at the depot who could use it more than me. He was old, ill, and on the way to see his only grandson. You must think I'm a churlish woman. First, I refuse the sleeping car, and then I choose to ride with the driver. I'm just not used to having things like this at my disposal. I suppose this was something I couldn't convey in my letters." Tillie looked down apologetically.

Mrs. Stone raised her index finger and lifted Tillie's face. Her green eyes had no choice but to gaze into her blue ones. "You conveyed confidence, charm, and ability in your letters. I don't care if you choose to sit with Michael or give up your sleeping car. I'd probably do the same in both instances. All I care about is someone willing to work hard. A person to make Max the best he can be. I'm not expecting miracles, but I have a good feeling about you already."

"Thank you, Mrs. Stone. You've made me feel better already. I don't always require compliments and encouragement because I'm normally the one who's giving them. I'm a bit intimidated by this large house and so much land. I grew up very differently, and I don't know if I'll ever get used to the Stone Ranch."

"If I got used to it, then you can do the same," Mrs. Stone commented.

Tillie looked at her with surprise. “Did you not grow up like this?”

“Goodness, no. My father was a ranch hand for the first Mr. Stone. I started coming around when I was young, and I fell for a cowboy named David Stone. His family didn’t accept me at first, but our love proved too strong for anyone to deny. I only wish the ranch were smaller so I could see more of my husband. We wake in the same quarters, but then I don’t see him until dusk. We pass one another now and then but not much more. Max is stubborn like his father, but both have good hearts.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Tillie smiled. “A good heart is all I need to work with. Many times it’s buried beneath the anger, resentment, and fear. It can be uncovered with a lot of digging. Then it’s polished off and shines brighter than before.”

Tillie followed Mrs. Stone into the house, which they referred to as the main house. A staircase wound its way down like a serpent, and it was made of dark wood. On the wall leading upstairs were portraits. They weren't two steps up when an imposing man came marching down the steps. He said hello but seemed in a hurry and hardly looked up.

"Hello, dear. Dinner is at five sharp. I'd like you to meet …" Mrs. Stone stopped talking because he wasn't listening.

Not at all surprised or angry by his indifference, Mrs. Stone continued up the stairs. Occasionally she stopped to point out a portrait of a distant relative, often on horseback. Many were in military garb with a revolver at their hip. It was hard to imagine anyone who lived in a place like the Stone Ranch entering a battle.

“That was my husband, Mr. Stone. He’s in a sour mood more than he isn’t. I assure you he used to be charming and even funny. I don’t know what happened to him.”

Tillie stopped in her tracks when she saw a portrait of a dashing man. His hand was casually draped across the neck of a muscular horse. He was dressed in riding attire, and his blue eyes sparkled. It could have been the work of the artist. Tillie had never seen eyes shine to that degree. His confidence stood out, and he was one with the horse.

“That’s my favorite portrait of Max. His eyes haven’t lit up like that since the accident. He’s mentioned to me that the portrait should be stored in the barn. Max claims the man in the portrait is gone, and he’s never coming back. I look at that picture on the wall, and I don’t think of what Max was. Instead, I think of what he can be. Perhaps he will always be different, but I also believe he can be better.”

Max was a grown man? Tillie asked herself in the privacy of her own mind. His age had never been raised in correspondence. From the way he was described, Max had the mannerisms of a ten-year-old. Did this mean that he was a man who acted like a child?

Tillie only assumed he was a boy. Her mindset was going to have to change dramatically. She had planned to treat him like her little brother Dougie. Now she knew that would be out of the question and wildly inappropriate.

Mrs. Stone wiped away a stray tear. It was apparent how deeply she loved Max. Tillie liked the woman and felt motivated to help her son. She wasn't going to let down a woman that she respected. Tillie had only just met Mrs. Stone, but she could tell she was a woman of integrity.

"Am I meeting Max today?" Tillie asked.

“I thought I would give you the chance to clean up and change clothes. You’ve been on the train for over a week. I imagine soot is dwelling in every crack and crevasse of your body. You’ll find fresh water in a basin set up in your room. We have running water on the first floor, but beyond that, it’s been a challenge. The journey up the pipes is one the water is reluctant to take. Lucy, one of the maids. will make sure you have fresh water at all times. Don’t hesitate to ask her for anything you might need.”

“That would be nice. Will you knock on my door and collect me when it’s time to meet Max?” Tillie asked.

“I will. I’m going to check on my daughter, Sally, and I’ll plan to see you in about an hour. Before I go, there is something I neglected to tell you,” Mrs. Stone explained. “Neither Max nor Mr. Stone knows that you’ve been hired as

Max's caretaker. My reasons for not telling them are complicated, and you'll come to realize it's for the best."

Tillie was now privy to two pieces of information she hadn't known an hour ago. Max was a grown man, and he had no idea he was getting a new caretaker. She was receiving free room and board plus a stipend. She had to expect conditions would come with such generous compensation. She held in any nerves this new information caused.

"Then I suppose they will both be surprised. Not much we can do about it now," Tillie chirped.

Tillie's room was at the end of a long hall. She learned that Max and his two sisters had bedrooms on the western side of the house. The staff occupied rooms above them, and Tillie was advised she could use any of them at her discretion. This was a tough one for

Tillie. She was used to being the caretaker and not the one being taken care of.

Mrs. Stone took a key from the pocket of her blue cotton dress and opened the door. She handed Tillie the key and went on her way.

The room was bigger than the entire house in Herkimer. A home that was once packed with seven people could fit snugly inside her new room. There was a window with a view of grazing fields where countless cattle were soaking up the sun.

Several large trees stood outside her window that she learned from Michael were pecan trees. He noted that some people called them hickory trees, and they grew nuts. Tillie had heard of pecan pie but never tasted one. It was probably because there were no pecans in Herkimer.

The four-poster bed was topped with the softest layer of feathers she'd ever felt. Tillie wondered how many geese had to give up their downy coats for her bed.

Tillie opened her trunk and pulled out a suitable brown dress. It was a house dress and one of only two she brought to Thistle. It had green pipping around the sleeves and a crocheted high-neck. Her mother added the embellishments so she would look proper at the Stone Ranch. It was nothing like the dress worn by Mrs. Stone, but it would have to do.

Tillie washed the layers of soot from her body. It didn't take long for the water to turn brown like a mud puddle. She heard a knock on the door.

"I'll be ready in just a moment, Mrs. Stone," Tillie said as she walked towards the door. She pulled it open a crack. Her dress was hastily

put on and the buttons had yet to be fastened. Tillie pulled open the door, and to her surprise, it wasn't Mrs. Stone.

"Hello, ma'am. I'm Lucy, the maid on this side of the house, and I was wondering if you needed anything."

"Come in. I'm Tillie. I have everything I need and more. A friendly face would be nice about now, and you've got that. Sit down," Tillie invited her.

"Oh, I shouldn't. I'm here to help you and not sit down," Lucy said.

"I'm hired to help, and I don't know why I should have someone wait on me. We're on the same level."

Lucy slowly sat down in the chair. “Ever since Doctor Hollingsworth came to stay, it’s been this way. He demanded a maid and butler at his disposal. I suppose it was because he had the title of a medical doctor. A lot of good those letters after his name did him. He didn’t last as long as the nurses before him.”

“I’m not a doctor, and I don’t need you at my disposal. I would like it if you visited now and again. I’d like to learn about you and how you like it here at the Stone Ranch,” Tillie said. “This is all new to me, and I’ll take any advice you can give.”

Lucy departed and promised to come to visit again. Tillie was clean and her hair pinned up in a bun, so she sat and waited for Mrs. Stone. Minutes and then what seemed like an hour passed. Tillie thought she may have forgotten. She set out on her own to find Max Stone, who must have been behind one of the many doors.

Chapter 4

The first door Tillie opened was a vacant guest room with painted blue walls. It looked very much like her room, but the color was different. She wondered if there were rooms of every color of the rainbow. She also questioned whether all the other caretakers had used her room. Was it the designated caretaker's room? She'd like to think not because it might be in some way cursed.

The next door Tillie came upon was locked. She wondered if that was Max's, but then he'd be locked in. As far as she knew, he couldn't get out of bed to unlock the door.

Tillie fidgeted as she walked towards the final door in the hallway. The warm weather in springtime was going to take some getting used to. The high neck on her dress wouldn't

do in the warm Texas weather.

The brass door handle turned, so she pushed and poked her head inside.

“You aren’t Benjamin. Who are you?” he demanded.

A man spoke from an ornate four-poster bed. His voice was coarse, like he hadn’t spoken in a while. Tillie would have thought it was Max, but it looked nothing like the young man in the portrait. She couldn’t tell if he had dimples since the hair had been allowed to grow wild. The color of his eyes was the same as Mrs. Stone’s, so she thought that maybe he was related.

He picked up a bell from the crowded table next to his bed. He began to ring it noisily. It nearly flew out of his hand.

“Benjamin, come in here at once!” he continued to call.

A man Tillie assumed was Benjamin came through the door. He wore striped trousers and a short black jacket. “Yes, sir. I came as soon as I could. What can I do for you, Max?”

“You can remove this intruder from my room at once. This oddly dressed woman just walked in without knocking. I never invited such a person to my room,” he blurted. “While you’re at it, pull the drapes shut. I have no reason to look outside after three. You shouldn’t even have to be told that.”

Tillie knew she should say something in her defense, but she found herself tongue-tied as she wasn’t used to such foul conduct. Tillie wasn’t afraid of the monstrous behavior from

Max but mad. How dare he treat a stranger with such disregard.

“Sir, this is Miss Tillie Acton. Miss Lucy told me she had arrived and was quite delightful. Your mother arranged for her to come. I assure you, there is nothing to worry about. You made a vow with every other caretaker to try them. You’d give each one two weeks to see what they could accomplish,” Benjamin reminded him.

“They all gave up and left even before the two weeks were over. There is a difference with this Tillie character,” Max started to explain. “Mother never alerted me she was coming. I could have saved her the trouble of coming from …”

Tillie finished his sentence for him. “Herkimer, I’m from Herkimer, New York.”

Max snickered. “Who the heck comes all the way to Thistle, Texas from Herkimish?”

“I believe she said Herkimer, sir,” Benjamin said.

“You can leave; I believe it’s almost time for you to fetch my dinner. I’ll deal with Tessie,” Max bellowed.

Benjamin walked out. Max hadn’t had the courtesy of learning the name of the town she was from. He also got the name given to her by her parents wrong.

“Would you prefer I call you Max or Mr. Stone?” She cleared her throat and flattened the creases in her dress. “You may call me Tillie, not Tessie. Not informing you of my arrival was your mother’s choice and not my

own.”

Tillie waited for a reply, but Max didn’t say a word. He only grimaced and stared at the drapes, which had been pulled shut. His curiosity was impossible to hide, and on occasion, Tillie caught him looking at her. It was a quick glance, and he thought he was being clever. What he didn’t know was that Tillie had eyes in the back of her head. It was a term her mother used with her three siblings.

“I’m sure my mother would have arranged a proper introduction. How do I know you’re not a thief in disguise?”

As if on cue, Mrs. Stone popped in. “Tillie, I’m sorry I was late in getting to you. I was talking with my daughter Sally and lost track of the time. I see you met Max, so I suppose my job here is done. Do you have any questions, Max?” she asked her son.

“I remember saying that I was done with caretakers and doctors. What’s the use? Another thing, have someone come up and get rid of that ghastly wheelchair,” Max ordered. “I love you, but I can’t handle another person telling me what to do and feeling sorry for me.”

Tillie let out a chuckle. Mrs. Stone smiled.

“I don’t think you have to worry about Tillie feeling sorry for you. As far as telling you what to do, you’ll have to get used to it. I love you too. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to join the family for dinner.”

Mrs. Stone closed the door behind her. Max was running low on excuses he could hurl at Tillie. He was rude and spoiled, but she didn’t budge. She had a job to do, and his horrible

attitude would not stop her from trying.

“We can’t start unless you talk to me. I’m here to make sure you push yourself to live the best possible life. I don’t know what that best life is. You’re going to have to tell me what you loved before the accident. Maybe there’s a chance we can bring it back into your life. It’ll never be the same, but you might be able to enjoy it just as much.”

“Are you a nurse or doctor that can heal me?” Max asked.

“No, and we can start if I introduce myself. I didn’t know if I was qualified at first because I’m not a nurse or doctor,” Tillie started. “I had considered being a nurse, but it requires school, which involves money. My family didn’t have a whole lot of that. We did have a lot of love, though. I never thought of my family as poor. Have you always known that you were extraordinarily wealthy?” Tillie

paused to see if he was ready to answer questions. “If you were born rich, it’s all you’ve ever known.”

Max didn’t shake his head, nor did he agree or disagree with anything she said. Tillie thought that eventually, he’d have some type of comment or question. She looked at the grandfather clock that stood in the corner of his room. It was five, and she had fifteen minutes left before his dinner came. It was the same time a tray would be delivered to her room, and she had to be present to receive it.

“Back to why I’m qualified to be here and why your mother chose me. I’ve been a caretaker of one sort or another for most of my life. My family owns a dairy farm, and my mother worked with my father to keep the business going. While she did that as well as cooking, cleaning, and tending the garden, I cared for my younger siblings.”

Tillie paused and looked up. Still no reaction from Max. He hadn't moved a muscle.

"I didn't only care for lively youngsters. I cared for two of the people I loved most in the world when they were nearing the end of their lives. My fiancé Jacob developed the fever first, and then the doctor diagnosed him with consumption. I made sure he didn't merely exist during his final days. I made sure he lived. I told jokes, sang songs, and read from the Bible, which he requested. No sooner was Jacob put in the ground than my brother Seth fell ill. His illness was the same, but his care was different. No two people are alike, and I learned that. Seth and Jacob were dying, and I helped them live their best lives. You are not dying, and I'm sure I can help improve your life if you let me try."

"It's tiring having a chat while the other person doesn't talk. However, I have loads more to say, so I'll be back in the morning. When I was caring for the dying, there were times they were too weak to speak. I knew

they heard me despite their silence, and I know you hear me. Tomorrow morning I'll move on to more uplifting things about me. I'll talk about my love of horses. I won a competition with my horse Margie once. I miss her so much that it hurts. I know you love horses too, and it's something we have in common."

Tillie was near to the door when she turned. There was one final thing to say to Max before she retired to her room. "By the way, I'm not oddly dressed as you rudely stated earlier. The warm Texas air is not what I'm used to, and my dress reflects that. This frock was thoughtfully sewed by my mother. I take an insult aimed at my dress to be one against my mother as well. I have no patience for your treatment of me or Mrs. Edna Acton. I'm merely pointing out that your manners are a disgrace. See you in the morning and enjoy your dinner."

Tillie was satisfied that she had the last word. When she thought about it, she had the only

words too. She shook her head and smiled.

Tillie finished the delightful dinner that was brought to her by Bonnie. She was one of the kitchen maids, and again, she felt silly. Being waited on was something she would never get used to and didn't care to. She was raised to do things for herself and not wait until things were done for her. Tillie was perfectly able to fix her own meal if she knew where the kitchen was.

After her meal of chicken and potatoes, Tillie went in search of the kitchen. She wished to return her tray and dirty dishes. She walked along the red and gold rug stretching down the long hall. It covered the shiny wood plank floors, which squeaked as she walked. The second set of footsteps made a noise behind her. Curious, she turned and almost dropped her tray.

“Hello, I didn’t mean to scare you. You must be Miss Tillie. I’m Sally Stone,” she introduced herself.

“You’re Max’s younger sister if I remember correctly what your mother told me. I was trying to find the kitchen,” Tillie explained. “I’m lost, I think.”

“You’re heading in the right direction, and don’t feel bad for getting lost. It happens to the best of us. Welcome to the ranch. The main house isn’t much fun, but when you get to the barn and stables it’s better. I’d live in the barn if I could, and I’ve slept there once or twice. Father will tan my hide if I do it again. He says it’s no place for a lady to sleep, but I disagree,” Sally said. “The animals are the only friends I have around this place, although I suppose the ranch hands are my friends too.”

“I get that. There are times I think horses understand me more than people do.”

“When you make it to the barn, I’ll introduce you around. Has Max said a word yet?”

“Hardly, except to insult me, but I’m tough, and I won’t allow that to get me down.”

“I like you already, and you have the right attitude. When mother said you were different, she was right.”

Sally whipped her two braids over her shoulders. She was coltish, and her hair resembled a horse’s mane. Tillie knew she would turn into a beautiful woman, but Sally seemed like that was the last thing on her mind. She carried herself like a spunky tomboy.

“It was sure nice meeting another friendly member of the Stone family,” Tillie chirped. “Now, if you could please lead me to the kitchen. I fear getting lost in this place!”

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